



DEMON IN EXILE SERIES **BOOK 6**

GRAY PRINCE

RORY SURTAIN

*"AN EPIC DEMON-SLAYING FANTASY
ADVENTURE SERIES"*

Gray Prince

A Demon in Exile Novel

By

Rory Surtain

—*Demon in Exile Series*—

Firefanged

The Scarred Man

Sorrow's Twin

Wind Catcher

Black Fortune

Gray Prince

The Devil and Koki-Ten

Storm Sister

Vigil Storm (Series Finale)

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Table of Contents

Maps

Colivar

Fugaku

Part 1

Daggers and Rings

Prologue

The Scenic Route

Chapter 1

Gray of Winter

Chapter 2

The Scarred Allegiance

Chapter 3

Safe Distance

Chapter 4

Bridges to Bridgeton

Chapter 5

Herds and Bosses

Chapter 6

The Gray Princess

Chapter 7

The Bottle-man's Ghost

Chapter 8

Doses of Black

Chapter 9

The Bridgeton Connection

Chapter 10

Ganos the Gray

Chapter 11

The Courtship of Vigil Stone

Bar Sinister

Burning Answers

Chapter 12

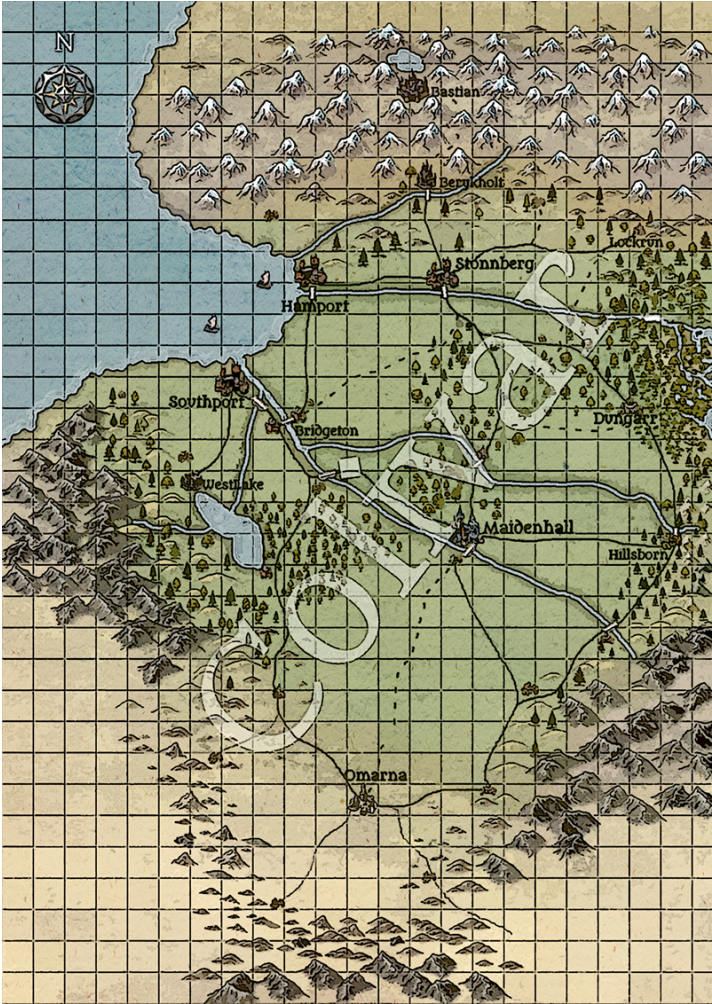
Storm Company

Part 2

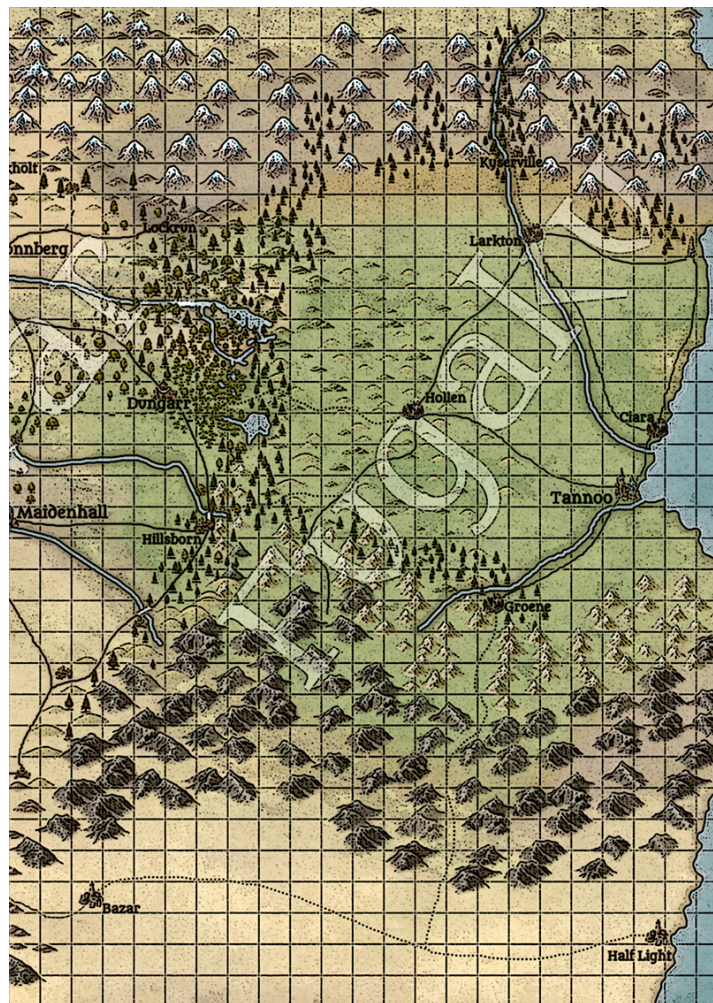
Swords and Dire Winds

Chapter 13
 The Gray Princess
Chapter 14
 The Hollen Connection
Chapter 15
 Conclave
Chapter 16
 Prince's Reach
Chapter 17
 Black Bets
Chapter 18
 Black Masks
Chapter 19
 Hollen Grail
Chapter 20
 The Lockrun Connection
Part 3
 Northern Gates
Chapter 21
 The Gulf of Breen
Chapter 22
 Night Work
Chapter 23
 The Collection
Chapter 24
 The Exchange
Chapter 25
 Oddsmakers
Chapter 26
 Early Returns
Chapter 27
 Rifter Returns
Chapter 28
 With the Tide
Bar Sinister
 Heartless
Chapter 29
 Blood Tiding

Realm of Colivar



Realm of Fugaku



“Beyond this small war, there is a plague. The sooner we meet it, the better.”

Part 1

Daggers and Rings

Prologue

The Scenic Route

Past midnight, Laila Storm strode through the teeming Garden of the King district in Maidenhall. She appeared smaller, almost fragile, but her scene-stealing form and perfectly cut attire tempted the eye of everyone. Walking beside her, my youngest sister scanned the chaotic crowd. Perhaps, that was what threw me off, the growth of Ayla, her self-assured and dominant appearance giving Laila a strong rival where the attention of others was concerned.

Ayla was still healing, slowly drawing energy from the rest of our brood as her soul found its place around a mistreated heart. She noticed my distant gaze, and I could feel the self-conscious smile spreading across her face; our connection was woven like crude steel between us. It gave the young woman the confidence to stroll with Laila in a family like no other. The pair kept an eye on each other in my absence, but I still checked in on them from afar. I didn't know when I'd be back, if ever.

The Garden of the King, a night-flower blooming even in spring with its nocturnal livelihood and vice, was Laila's domain and the seat from which she watched over the Lower Districts of Colivar's capital city. The far-reaching influence of the Scarred Man hadn't surprised her after all, but, knowing the high cost for such a feat, it had planted a stalk of fear in her heart. It was only right that I distract her.

I pushed a whisper through the soul bond between myself and my surrogate aunt, *"Ayla looks cold tonight. Perhaps you could find her something a bit less revealing."*

Laila, for her part, hated when I did that, preferring a far more open

thread between us. She spoke out loud, knowing that I could perceive her words as if I was right there, walking beside her, “I’m betting any assassin will take a good long look at her before they make their move.”

Ayla scoffed, “Ara’s complaining about my dress, isn’t he? Nobody would see my new boots if I wore something longer.”

Laila’s influence had certainly taken hold in the young woman, already teaching her the more subtle methods for leverage and control. I was sure that there was plenty that I could learn from Laila, given a chance, but the harsher methods worked as well, and the dress just wasn’t my size.

“Tell her that Raven is jealous enough without having more competition.” My aunt would love that response, knowing of my ability to get myself in trouble with my better half and the ongoing rivalry between my adopted sisters.

“You’re speaking with Laila again, aren’t you?” Raven touched my arm, seeking my undivided attention as if such a thing existed.

“When will you be coming back?” Laila was worried.

“Ask Ayla,” I murmured, closing the link to my family in Maidenhall. Three-way conversations were confusing enough. “Just checking in,” I said to Rae.

The intricate brood connections were a recent development, a parting gift from a once-powerful death-demon. The last shard of its soul had been consumed by an alpha demon named *Koki-Ten* in an epic clash on the road north of Stonnberg. The stunning attack by five demon-driven assassins had remapped the landscape of my heart and soul in ways we’d yet to comprehend. The results could be found in the war-dagger strapped across my chest and the constant jealousy in my partner’s eyes. I still had nightmares from the battle with the Nantine *Get of the Damogir*, their eyes glowing a hellish red as they charged our small company. As for my own eyes, well, it’s best if you just didn’t look.

Rae followed my loss of focus. “Everything all right in Maidenhall?”

“Nothing that I should worry about, but I do.”

“Tila’s there. She’s the sane one of the bunch.”

‘The bunch’ was Rae’s way of referring to my sisters, by law or by

brood. We'd all suffered plenty together, and I wouldn't trade them for anything if it could be helped.

"Hopefully, Tila's keeping a safe distance from the more dangerous side of my family."

Raven, the half-elf daughter to a dark elf King, sat atop my family's list of most dangerous persons, but a ferocious hunter didn't always outlast a devious one, and I had plenty of both within House Storm.

"Are you still with me?" Raven whispered, failing to mask her need. Hers was a question often repeated, one she whispered to avoid screaming it instead.

"Princess Ylamil-Storm, you can doubt my sanity, but not what's left of my heart. My life may have gotten a bit complicated lately, but that's a good thing for your husband. It helps keep him out of trouble." I wished the last sentence were even remotely true and that Rae would halfway buy it.

She knew better. The steel chains they'd clamped upon me were proof of that.

Chapter 1

Gray of Winter

“YOU did WHAT?”

I loved my aunt. I'll say that upfront before getting into the many ways that she might kill me in the coming minutes. Most methods would begin with Laila pointing at her brother, Ben, or his bodyguard, Fraim, and then at my throat or nether regions.

“It'll be safest there. I promise,” I spoke with utmost certainty, which, when I honestly thought about it, also ended with a ‘*You did WHAT?*’ moment.

Feth.

Ben leaned against the kitchen wall with his arms folded, Fraim at his side, mimicking the former Major of the Realm Guard. Being an empath, I could sense their deep skepticism and enjoy the looks on their faces.

“Ara, you locked the Black soul of an Infernal assassin in the basement of an orphanage. Makes perfect sense to me,” Cress deadpanned. She was seated to my left, directly across from Laila.

We hadn't gotten to full introductions yet, having started with the most immediate bits first. I was glad that Raven and Ayla had been too exhausted to attend this late-night meeting and was feeling plenty tired myself. It had been a terribly long trip home from Berykholt, and the conversation here was only getting started.

“A shard. Half a soul, probably less,” I clarified, pulling out my newest fang-blade. “Meet *Koki-Ten*, a *Kjaira* bound to serve the Damogir of Niantia.”

Damogir was the Nantine word for Emperor. I'd never met the man,

but his choice of weapons was exquisite, sourced from an alpha death-demon incarnate. The Second Fang of *Koki-Ten* hosted another soul shard of the talkative *Kjaira*. While I owned the blade, the Emperor of Niantia owned the demon.

I sheathed the weapon, not wanting to put off introductions any further. “Cressida Storm, please meet your sister Laila Storm. Laila is my second in Maidenhall, and she has a similar hold on my heart as you.”

“No,” Laila declared, standing up. She was shaken by the news, knowing the reasons for such a far-reaching connection.

Cress stood as well, facing my surrogate aunt and doing her best to mask her constant state of pain. Laila, for her part, stared into Cressida’s eyes, mirrors of her own in many ways.

“Yes,” I replied. “Laila, I’m going to need your help, and things between us are going to change.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

I looked from Laila to Ben and back before answering. “Laila Storm, please meet your sister, Cressida Storm née Magata. The leather wrap on her wrist is soaked in my blood, and a permanent *Kjaira* brood bond is woven between us. Both are needed for Cressida to survive. In Tannoo, she was known as the Gray Wind, an assassin destined for the Black.”

I’d been anticipating Laila’s reaction to the two-headed introduction, knowing it could go either way. Cress seemed to shrink as she sensed the powerful woman before her and the serious, deadly men that watched her back. I reached over and took her hand, adding a third, more powerful connection between us, one that gently pulled the fear from her heart.

I opened my connection to Laila, allowing her to feel and see what I perceived at that moment. It was a rare event between us, and she quickly realized the carved-out nature of the young woman.

“Who did *that* to her?” Laila’s eyes watered in pity and disgust.

“House Rathven. The war ended with their demise.”

Rathven, with their Black deals, had demanded the outcome. By being my adopted sisters, so had Laila and Cress.

“As my new bodyguard, Cress is allowed to carry the fangs of her

betrothed and no more. Her heart must heal before she can become herself.”

I carried the soul of *Madd-Jak* in my ring. Had I not intervened, the powerful death-demon would have been chained to Cress in an unholy marriage, giving her a violent, Hell-ridden life. *Madd-Jak* liked to play among its kind, and I offered it the chance on rare and dire occasions.

“Cressida, we have much in common, and I’d like you to stay here with me. Ben, meet your new sister, Cressida Storm.”

Ben Heck was Laila’s true brother, born of the same blood. His ability and commanding presence had lifted him to the post of Major in the King’s Realm Guard before he resigned to shepherd his long-lost sister. His bodyguard and friend, Fraim Johns, was still in the Realm Guard, assigned to protect members of the Company of Vigil Storm. Four of his pack mates were stationed in the Royal Quarter protecting my consul, Lynda Snow.

“Ara, you are a prince among thieves to steal her away,” Laila said.

“Ara is a slow prince of the Gray,” Cress agreed quietly, quicker than me in her exhaustion.

Laila eyed me with suspicion. “He is?”

I hadn’t said anything to Cress about my Gray House connections or the influence I’d gained on my last eventful trip. My shocking gray hair was irrelevant to her assertion but poetic, nonetheless.

“Yes, I am,” I confessed. “In more ways than one.”

Laila’s concern spun from Cress to me. “Brother, in the name of the Scarred Man, how many ways will you ruin my night?”

I shut down our connection, trying to hide the news, but Cress blurted it out for me.

“Five,” she said. “Hollen, Hillsborn, Berykholt, Tannoo, and Maidenhall. Six if you count Lockrun where he’s practically the King.”

That was fair, the part about Lockrun, but the others still needed work.

“I have only a partial hold on Tannoo, with Rhill being one of three remaining Gray Houses,” I clarified. “And Angus Rhill is owed a visit to make our pact crystal clear.”

“Should I head to the basement now or wait until you leave?” Laila looked more than pissed. “That relic of yours should do nicely for

ending all my troubles.”

I strove to distract her. “Ayla has a new name. She is now Ayla’sen for the winds that her wings create.”

My aunt ignored that important news completely. She would experience it soon enough and wonder at it.

“You don’t love me anymore. That’s what this is about, right?” Laila played dirty and always did, and it wasn’t the fun kind of dirty.

“It was owed,” Cress and I said in unison. There was nothing freaky about that, not at all.

“It was owed,” I repeated. “And as the Scarred Man, it came naturally.”

Laila didn’t look convinced. “That’s why you carry the Gray Wind of Tannoo?”

“As your brother.”

Laila considered my final answer, softening. “And the other changes you’ve mentioned?”

“There is something that I owe you if you’re ready.” I wasn’t sure that I was ready, but I had to share my burden with someone.

“Am I?” she replied.

My view of Laila showed a heart almost healed, one connected to many, and a mind sharpened with the intent to survive and protect. Her perception of the world began with her extended family and ended with herself taking careful steps in every direction. She’d become a beacon for me to follow and a boon to the citizens of the Lower Districts.

While Laila had healed and grown in her humanity, I’d done the opposite, stepping into the path of the Infernal and carting off vast amounts of the Black, demonic energy that buried me, heart and soul. My heart had become banded, wrapped in the touch of too many dark souls, and I needed to share it with the one person that would understand and accept it. Taking hold of Laila’s hand, I let go of my inner walls.

Laila froze as new sights and sounds greeted her; the whispers and fangs, the claws and connections, each flashing in her mind, were a burden and a prize of our trust. She sat down under the weight. “Brother, I can see why you are gray.” She noticed my other hand still holding onto Cress. “And slow.”

"Hart is concerned," I offered up a vast understatement. "And she can't carry her secrets alone."

"Send your inquisitor over here tomorrow. I still have some questions."

"I will do so in exchange for your help with Cressida and her misfitting man-clothes. Please tell Master Layne that it's an emergency."

The best tailor in the Lower Districts was a long-time friend of Laila. Layne never forgot anyone's measurements, and his shop never closed. Don't ask me how he managed it.

"Ara, that will be the best part of my day. Now, go home to bed before I have Ben carry you there. Your bodyguard will be fine staying here with me."

"There are three reasons why you'd want me in your brood. First, you already have my claws, and with the brood's connection, I could empower them fully with my soul. This would limit the Damogir's ability to recruit new, powerful Get as his enforcers. Second, I could heal your sister and restore your power to full form. You'd no longer be so slow of mind or gray."

The fact that I held the soul of *Koki-Ten*, imbued within a fang-dagger, may have explained her willingness to share, but I didn't buy her story for a second. Being an alpha of the Infernal broods, the death-demon existed in our world as a dark soul divided among relics, weapons fashioned from her incarnate claws and fangs.

"And the last reason?"

"Your brood needs an alpha for direction and a true weaver to complete the six. Otherwise, your enforcers will dominate the stalkers with their power."

I almost took offense. *"Are you suggesting that Madd-Jak is dominant over me or that I'm not worthy of being a brood's alpha?"*

Well beyond my ability to fight in its physical form, *Madd-Jak* in soul-form was still utterly terrifying with its almost boundless power. As a soul held within my ring, it was always eager to *play* whenever I let it.

Following our battle against the Nantine assassins and my heart's unchaining from *Koki-Ten*, the burly *Madd-Jak* had conceded any

question of dominance to me. It listened when I called and, more importantly, heeded when I sent it home to the ring. I didn't believe for a moment that *Koki-Ten*, in all its glib glory, would be half as obedient.

"As Firefanged, you're a sorcerer of the Black, not a weaver of souls. Your domain is War, not connection."

"And my other sisters?" I asked.

"Cressida Storm is an enforcer, once destined to pair with Madd-Jak, and Ayla'sen Storm, one so devious in her approach, has the aspect of a night-stalker. Her partnership with Fei-Krull is not a surprise."

Fei-Krull had been renamed *Sorrow*, becoming a hunter that protected rather than destroyed.

"Koki-Ten, why do I get the feeling that you're a night-stalker as well?"

"Alphas have many talents, so yes, you may be right."

"Why didn't our brood bonds end when you destroyed Tao-Rien?"

Tao-Rien, also known as *Promise*, had been the alpha *Kjaira* that created the brood bonds for my original brood-mates shortly before losing the fight of its long life.

"The bonds are weavings of your souls. You didn't perish along with the weaver, so, like your garments, they still exist."

By the alpha's definition, I already had the six needed for my brood. Raven, my better half, most certainly held the soul of an enforcer in *Rei-Seeck*, the death-demon wrapped around her heart; her ferocity and need to protect were supreme, and our souls were bound in many subtle ways.

Sorrow, my original brood sister, was also a night-stalker and a hunter of Infernal corruption. Our blood and souls had mixed after we'd snared each other in a midnight trap, each of us being more than the other could handle. I wore those scars, splayed across my skin, and honored its guile with my pain before any others.

I sheathed the blade, setting it on the table beside my bed, and opened my gray eyes to those of Raven, the most beautiful woman in my world.

"Good morning, sleep well?" A hint of jealousy leaked into her voice.

"Still tired," I replied. *"The conversation with Laila ran longer than*

usual last night. It seems like my trip was a source of trouble for everyone.”

“And speaking of trouble, how is Cressida Storm doing? I’m surprised you didn’t bring her home with you.”

Sorrow lay spread across the foot of our bed, enjoying the sun streaming through the open window. With the death of *Promise*, we were friends again and brood mates. I’d found her a surrogate form, that of an eastern black panther, while her twin soul existed within a fang-blade carried by Vigil Moon up in Lockrun.

“With *Sorrow* being here, I didn’t think the bed would have enough room.” OK, perhaps that wasn’t the best observation to make at the moment. Being slow, I waited for a smile that never appeared.

Rae reached out and touched my upper lip, drawing attention to the scar left behind by another of my poor choices in life. I had made several on my recent trip but couldn’t decide which I would change, given a chance. It had been a dangerous mission, an ever more brutal affair, and by the end, our goal had simply been one of survival.

“*Promise* is dead and gone along with her brood claims.” I knew it wouldn’t do any good, but I tried. “As for Cress, she’s staying with Laila. My aunt was greatly concerned for her well-being, and you should be too.”

I held Rae to a higher standard than I held myself at the moment. Her hair was still a deep, healthy black as opposed to mine, which made lifeless gray look good.

“And why is that?”

“She is your sister by law and a brood-mate of ours. Also, I may have caused a bit of a stir by taking her away from Tannoo.”

“Caused a bit of a stir?” she echoed. “Like the stir that you caused in my heart during your trip? The episodes where you seemed to disappear, our connection going silent, or worse yet, flaring up with emotion, your heat and anger coming through to tell me you were causing more than a stir in Fugaku. Tell me, what kind of stir did you cause in that girl to get that beauty mark on your lip?”

She’d waited a fortnight on the road to get that off her chest, not wanting to share her concerns in front of the rest of Company Storm.

“I stabbed her in the heart,” I explained it perfectly. That may have

been the lowest point in my life, doing what I did to Cress, and I was paying for it in ways that I'd never imagined.

Raven wasn't as slow as me, but my short remark forced her to think and breathe. "You did what the Gray Houses of Tannoo originally intended, granting Cressida the power of the Black?"

"Rae, it kept her alive the whole trip home, even if our reunion and my health were ruined in the process. And now, *Promise* is dead and gone, and Cressida is empty yet linked within the brood."

"What about that alpha death-demon hiding in your war-blade?" Rae recognized the most dangerous entity in the room.

"*Koki-Ten* is too dangerous to allow out, but I can talk with it, and I've learned a ton about the brood, the *Get of the Dam*, and the Infernal Contract in Niantia."

"My husband spends more time talking to the Black than to his own wife."

I'd been wed and divorced in an instant before her very eyes. Rae wasn't taking the state of my being for granted, and neither was I.

"I talk with you all the time, even from half a continent away, it seems, and I am completely honest when I do."

"Did you kiss her?" Rae was exacting her revenge, one confession at a time.

I could fight back and still be honest. "When I stabbed Cress, yes, I did, but don't ask me to explain any further. I don't think that I can, three-ways with demons being what they are."

"So, who bit your lip? Cressida or *Promise*?"

"Both? I owed Cress one from the stabbing, and frankly, the girl really needed the boost."

Raven didn't know whether to laugh or lash out at that last remark. "You're telling me there was a threesome with the soul of a demon as if that's OK?"

Only *Promise* was OK, having been destroyed completely in our world. As the survivors, we still had a long way to go before reaching that vaunted state.

"Rae, there was nothing even remotely level about that situation, nor is Cressida even close to being OK now. If I told you everything that was wrong with her, you'd be heading over to Laila's before lunch

to put the girl out of her misery.”

“Why haven’t you?” She saw the truth in my words and was trying hard to avoid being moved by them.

“It is owed to my sisters, Laila and Cat, and to my wife, the champion and protector of us all.”

“Now, you’re overselling it,” Rae replied. “Laila and Cat were good enough for me.”

“Am I forgiven?” Here I was, putting the fang before the *night-demon*.

“Let me talk with Laila first. As Champion of House Storm, I must take part in the redemption of Cressida Storm.”

And Ara Storm, though she failed to mention it at the time.

“I’m open to anything if it helps Cress survive and heal.” I didn’t know what it would take to make things right before the coming spring campaign.

“Threesomes are still out of the question,” she smiled, “And you will follow whatever Laila and I decide.”

I knew I wasn’t going to like what was next, but a kiss is a kiss, and as much as I had a right to choose my own path, Raven had the right to react and guide me forward.

“Was that last remark a question?” I had to be sure.

“No.”

Chapter 2

The Scarred Allegiance

A day later, they had it all figured out. An after-breakfast Storm Company meeting didn't have the same energy without Cynan Black and Vigil Moon haggling for the last cup of coffee. Still, Ben and Laila made up for it with their usual efficiency, and a couple of surprises kept us all on our toes.

Laila began the discussion before Ben could sour my mood with his looks of disappointment. "The theme for today's chat is distance," she glanced in my direction, "And I will explain why in a moment, but first, I would like to formally welcome my new sister, Cressida Storm, to Maidenhall."

Cress stood up, grabbing the attention of everyone in the room. Where my little sister Ayla was a gangly yet coordinated teenager, Cressida Storm was a woman with plenty of toned muscle beneath her perfectly tailored leathers, hand-dyed in bone and dark brown to match her hair. While Laila was wearing a long, shielded leather coat over her dress and boots, Cress was fit for battle in an exotic leather jacket with crooked black stripes, an underlining of chain mesh armor, external steel vambraces, and custom sleeves for her eight-inch fang-daggers. Her leather pants were tucked into sturdy boots that were all that remained of her original man-clothes. I was impressed and looked at Raven with surprise, knowing she'd helped stock Cressida's closet the day before. Little did I know that this was all part of her revenge.

Laila continued, "We've found that we have a lot in common and will be acting in the best interest of the Scarred Man as we plan our way through the current situation, that being the appearance of a Gray

prince in the continent's underworld. We expect trouble to be arriving soon among many varied reactions."

I sat between Raven and Viren Drake, keeping my eyes to myself and my hand in Raven's. Drake was a former Fuga Recon sergeant and the husband of Becks, Tila Na'am's older sister. Drake was rock solid when it came to knife work and traveling through enemy terrain. Rebekah Na'am, legally my sister, was still a bit cold to the idea of having a younger brother, while her sister Tila had grown to know and support me. I'd been present in Tannoo during the assassination of their father and probably felt worse about it than they did. Lord Na'am's untimely death left the governor's seat in Hollen unclaimed and factored heavily into this morning's discussion.

Already knowing the score about Cressida Storm, Rae had gotten an earful from my aunt about the newly unsettled situation in the criminal underworld. It wasn't uncommon for a pair of bosses to form an alliance or partnership based on years of built-up trust and shared success. By the Gray rules, cooperation was allowed, and it wasn't a cause for general alarm by the underpinnings of our society. Unfortunately, in a month, I had gone off and eloped with the bosses of five domains across two different Realms. Each of my claims was perfectly valid, but due to their number and rapid rise, word would be getting around, and the other Gray Houses would have the inclination to object. We would be receiving visitors shortly and would have to decide whether to relinquish our claims or fight to hold them.

After building the picture for Vigil Company Storm, Laila ended, "For now, the question is one of safe distance. Who stays, and who goes on behalf of Company Storm?"

When no one spoke up, she looked at me for an answer.

I'd already decided that I would be going, leaving the company safely on the sanctioned side of Maidenhall but needed a clearer picture. "Shouldn't we first agree to our path forward before drawing the lines for battle?"

"My brother is a Gray prince and slow for his effort to save me," Cress seemed to apologize to the room. "Ara, by the Gray, you have every right to hold onto what is yours, and for you to decline now, after your claims and connections have been sealed, would only invite

others to view you as weak. Don't encourage them to take what you hold dear."

Laila simplified, "Gray rule number one: never take what you can't hold."

The Gray rules must have had close to twenty rules, all vying for the first slot, but I could get behind this one. Certainly, I could preserve my connections, or I wouldn't have made them, but I hadn't counted on the rest of the Gray Houses pounding their way to my door to object.

"No one can take what I hold dear without taking my heart," I replied to the room. "As this is a matter for the Scarred Man and not the Order of the Vigil, we will divide the crew. Captain Hartwell will take command of our company and return to Sturgess Hall with Inquisitor Hart and Tila Na'am. You can train there as easily as here, and it'll be far safer behind the Royal Curtain Wall."

Ben nodded, "I can reassign the wolves to cover the Checkered Flag and Laila's place."

Our five Realm Guardsmen were often referred to as a pack of wolves, all alphas in their abilities and demeanor. They were younger versions of the King's Royal Hounds and almost as lethal as our dark elf bodyguards.

"Leave three to guard Lynda Snow. Company Storm must show a strong presence by continuing to focus on Maidenhall's defense against the Infernal. It can't be too distracted by the wars of a wayward Vigil."

Ben looked uncertain for once. He had his own priorities and was concerned for his sister. "Why not move Laila and Cress into the Checkered Flag until things sort themselves out?"

Laila answered, "Distance. For the health of all involved, distance is important. Isn't that right, Raven?"

I looked to my right while Viren Drake chuckled on my left, and I suddenly realized that Becks was my favorite of the Fuga couple. I'd be speaking with her later.

"That's right," said Rae. "Ara will need some time to sort out his path and the scale of his new domain."

"He will?" I asked, thinking that we agreed after all.

Laila clarified, "It may be helpful to visit a few of the other Gray

bosses before they decide to visit us.”

“But we just got back. Yser and Cress are as exhausted as me, and Becks won’t let Drake leave her sight.”

Raven agreed, “You’re right. They will all be staying here. Keeping a safe distance from the new prince is important.”

Yseria, my sister and bodyguard, piped up, “Raven Ylamil, who are you to say whether I stay or go?” The platinum blonde dark elf looked like she could use a week of uninterrupted sleep, maybe two.

“Do you really want to go?” Raven shot back.

“Well, no. I’ll be lucky to be ready to ride for Bastian in a couple of months.”

“Exactly. And Cress will need at least a year to recuperate.” Laila had obviously worked out the script beforehand with Rae.

“A year? Then who will be my bodyguard?” I said.

The slam of Rae’s hand on the table made us all jump, though I swear that I flinched the least.

“Oh,” I frowned. “Of course.”

Viren Drake and Yseria Warric had proven to be easy-going and non-judgmental companions for my adventures, always letting me sort myself out in the end. Still, I’d never been comfortable showing off my darker side to Raven.

Not wanting to be left out, Ayla chimed in, “Being members of Ara’s brood, *Sorrow* and I will accompany my brother.” She was my fifteen-year-old wild card and a counterweight across the fulcrum from Laila and Raven. Ayla knew what she was getting herself into, and I wondered at the look on Laila’s face as it grew into a smile.

“What if another *Kjaira* hunter shows up?” said Laila. “We won’t have you or Raven here to protect us. We’ll need *Sorrow* and Ayla to help defend the city.”

For Ayla, I could tell that this idea flew about as well as the Stone Pigeon Inn in the upper Market District, but it made sense if you assumed the other bosses dabbled in the Black. I had my doubts. Ayla and *Sorrow* would be valuable spotting and hunting interlopers, and my strong brood connection to Ayla would let me know if I needed to return in an emergency. Still, I had an even stronger connection with Laila, and Ben Heck had a small army in place for dealing with our

rivals' more mundane threats.

Juno Hartwell voiced his opinion, "Ara, we'll be on hand to counter any demonic entities, and Tila can keep watch for any ill winds, but I'm not comfortable being held at arm's length again when it comes to a fight."

"Captain, what does *Kol'rigan* have to say about the situation?"

Kol'rigan was Juno's hellsword, home to the dark soul of a Hell-knight from the Infernal Domain. *Kol'rigan*, a general of the Infernal Hordes, was loyal to House Storm due to my standing as *Firefanged*.

"You should be watching for a quick first strike from one of the stronger Gray Houses. Catch them in transit if you can. By finding them at their weakest and most unprepared, you can annihilate them before they reach their intended target."

"Why not sit back and set a trap for them here?" I replied.

"That's what they'd expect a weak prince to do, and waiting allows them to call in favors and hire mercenaries before they hit us."

"Us?"

"We serve Vigil Storm, be it the demons or the devils that besiege us. Sturgess Hall has the Wall, the Kingsmen, and the Royal Curtain Guard to protect it. While I'm glad to escort Tila and Hart to a place of safety, please allow us to defend our home here from all threats." Juno was loyal, confident, and had the hellsword to back it up.

Only weeks before, Company Storm had stood face to face against a band of *Kjaira* assassins on the road home from Berykholt. Maidenhall was their city too, and their axes would certainly work to deter any direct attacks.

"We are all devils," I said. "I will be glad for the help in protecting my tired sister, Yseria."

Andarion, Raven's cousin and bodyguard, came in from the back garden looking for a break in the conversation. "Visitors have arrived. They've asked to speak with Mister Gray."

I looked at Laila, "Already?"

She shrugged. "Andarion, please show them in."

A moment later, coffee cups were dropped all around the dining room as Sergeant Caleb Masterson walked through our backdoor. I might have been surprised at his appearance, but it was about time for

an answer from Berykholt.

I crossed my arms. "Sergeant Masterson, what brings you to Maidenhall? Come to square things in the sentinel recruiting department or perhaps knock some rust off of Sevin Martell?"

Perhaps hoping for a more private meeting, Caleb Masterson was surprised to see several former recruits staring back at him. He was dressed in plain clothes, not the apparel of an Order of the Vigil sentinel-sergeant.

I was still peeved with the man for dropping a foreign assassin into my lap. The Nantine woman had been chained to the soul of a *Kjaira* death-demon and led four more demon-driven hunters. All five had been after my wife. As we traveled south from Berykholt, we'd been less than ready to counter the threat but had stood our ground and burned them where they fell. Masterson owed us all for that fun time, and even if it wasn't entirely his fault, a small warning would have helped.

The sergeant replied, "If he needs it, sure, but first, I'm here to deliver a message from my sister Gena. She thanks Mister Gray for the gift and wears it proudly, waiting for his safe return."

I exhaled in relief. That was one less trip for me to make, and we'd be going north soon enough.

"Caleb, please meet my aunt, Laila Storm. She happens to be the second to the Scarred Man of Maidenhall and is visiting us today with news of a Gray prince."

Masterson offered us a warning, "Word has reached Stonnberg of the Scarred Man's influence surging beyond Maidenhall, and a caravan from the East arrived, noting his reach as far as Tannoo."

My reach had erased an entire Gray House in Tannoo and its Black-bearing assassin. My reach had caused a formidable stir, or so I'd been told.

"Mister Gray was horribly ill during his recent stay in Stonnberg but might be heading back that direction soon. Perhaps he can represent the Scarred Man on his way through, given the proper introductions."

"Brother, the Badger of Stonnberg is a weasel and best to be avoided in his den," said Laila.

Caleb's one good eye focused steadily on my surrogate aunt. "Well

put, young lady. Few have the guts to voice such a truth.”

I worked hard to keep a level voice, “Mister Masterson, while I’m glad to hear of Geneva’s gratitude and Laila’s wisdom, words can’t salve the many wounds that Mister Gray received during a furious encounter on the road north of Stonnberg.”

I’d been expecting some of his best recruits and instead been handed an ambush of Infernal proportions. Masterson had seen us fight and knew my stories of success over the worst that the Infernal Domain had to offer. As Vigil Storm, it was my duty to seek out those monsters, but as Mister Gray, different rules applied, and plenty was owed for such an unbalanced deed. I’d take what I could get.

“Early, step forward and meet Vigil Storm.”

At Masterson’s command, a sentinel, northern blonde with a recruit’s strong build, gave me a bow and introduced himself, “Sentinel-adept Early Vale.”

He’d brought me a single young recruit, and I had one word for the sergeant. “Why?”

I could feel the itch curling Masterson’s fingers as I asked. Early was obviously special in some way.

“Early, in this room, where would you rank yourself in terms of fighting ability?”

“At the bottom.”

“We use Early to rank the sentinels as part of the recruitment process and grading out the alphas, but that only works well for those sentinels that haven’t yet killed a demon,” Masterson explained.

Great. This was turning out to be far less fortuitous than expected. I’m sure my expression indicated as much. “And?”

Masterson grinned. “Early, who is the most dangerous person here?”

Sentinel Vale showed us that he was a careful sort, “On which scale?”

“Demon-slayer.”

“Vigil Storm, by far.”

“Not the young lady sitting beside him?” said the sergeant.

Raven, as Champion of Company Storm, would have been a smart bet.

"She's a distant second. She has the soul of a night-demon wrapped around her heart. He carries three black souls of equal or greater power to hers and a fourth that I can't begin to measure."

The room's stoic reaction didn't match the surprise we all felt at the candid explanation, but I wasn't that impressed with his *clear sight* ability to see the *twist* in others.

"Sergeant, I already have an inquisitor, and she's a lot better looking than Sentinel Vale."

Masterson wasn't finished. "Assassin," he said to Vale.

"The man who is sitting to the Vigil's left or her." Early pointed at Viren and Cress. "On better days, it would be her, definitely."

These weren't better days, but things were getting interesting. "What other scales does Mister Vale perceive?"

"Early, who is the boss of Maidenhall?"

Early pointed at Laila, and Masterson beamed at this most dangerous insight.

Laila countered his smile. "Master Vale, who is the Gray Prince?"

Sentinel Vale pointed at me. "Vigil Storm holds your allegiance."

Feth. I'd never seen Hart do anything like that.

Drawing the weapon with *Koki-Ten's* soul, I placed my fang-blade on the dining room table. "Other black souls aside, who is more dominant, the demon or me?"

"As things stand now, you are."

I wouldn't have taken that bet. "Could I best the power of two?" I desperately needed to know.

"I don't know. I'd have to see the other."

"Do I hold its allegiance?"

"No. It belongs to another."

This was getting fun and at least a bit insane.

"Who is the Gray Princess?"

After a glance around the room, Early pointed at Raven. He was sharp.

"Do I hold her allegiance?" I asked.

Inquisitor Hart screamed, "Stop!"

The room froze before anyone could gasp. Hart was completely livid as she dragged Sevin Martell from his seat and pointed toward the

door.

I took that as a hint. "Sergeant Masterson, you can call us even for the time being. Early Vale, you are now a sentinel-adept in Company Storm. How do you feel about distance?"

Chapter 3

Safe Distance

Raven had been impressed. I'd seen the opportunity for an advantage and took it without hesitation. She thought that I had the mind and the makings of a devious dark elf, a true prince of the Ylamil line, and she was flattered that I thought of using Early's ability on her before anyone else. At the same time, she had me pinned to the dining room wall, making sure that my eyes didn't stray from hers as the meeting ended and the sentinels filed out.

It wasn't like Rae to be this riled, and it had to be more than Cressida's presence that had gotten under her skin after the fangs of Koki-Ten had gotten under mine. Eventually, she would get her way, but not today, and we'd both be keeping our distance, starting tomorrow.

I reached behind Rae's back and slowly drew the curved black blade of a *Kjaira* claw weapon from a sheath on her lower back. Just having my arm around her for a moment allowed me to breathe in her myrrh-tinted scent and helped to calm us both. "Do you remember who gave you this relic and why?"

She took the blade from my hand and smelled it. Somehow that small action turned me on, and I grabbed her collar, kissing her hard on the mouth. She didn't stab me or bite me. She kissed me back, and my heart pounded eagerly at the attention.

"I'm sure you had a good reason to distract me," she finally replied.

Perhaps, but I was already distracted with a dozen Gray threats and Black souls hovering around me, and I couldn't begin to explain how that weighed on my mind.

“I need to speak with everyone today, even Cress, to sort out the best path forward. My heart isn’t a battleground, Rae. Please talk to Hart if you don’t believe me.”

I pushed away from the wall and out of Raven’s embrace, letting her enjoy the distance I felt. Cressida was sitting quietly in one corner of the room, trying not to look miserable. I sat down beside her and took her hand, thinking of my friend Cat and the promise I’d made before she’d left for Lockrun. Cressida Storm was my adopted sister, and I would help her survive.

Laila, Ayla, and Ben had been waiting patiently for Rae and me to finish our chat, and I was glad to see Viren and Becks had also stuck around. It was time to prepare for the Gray lords’ first moves and the pawns that were sure to come our way. Realm wars and demonic incursions seemed to align themselves with the warmer, drier months of the calendar, but the schemes and jousting of the underworld were a year-round affair.

I offered the start of my plan, “Laila, I’m the Gray Prince, weak and slow. As such, please bolster our watchers on the Docks, the Barrens Bridge, and the port roads north and west.”

My strength was in the loyalty of my bosses and the dangerous reputation that I had in Fugaku. It was also in the reputations of the Scarred Man of Maidenhall and the Gray Wind of Tannoo. Looking to solidify my official standing in Fugaku, we’d meet with the Fuga ambassador later today, and we’d tackle the loyalty of House Rhill once the initial threat to Maidenhall was handled. With the persona of the Scarred Man as a front, I was an unknown to many and planned to keep it that way. I also had Laila Storm, boss of the Lower Districts in the largest city in Colivar, and beyond that, plenty of contained fury to go around.

“Why not the eastern road, too, while we’re at it?” Laila asked.

She knew a hurry-up and wait strategy wouldn’t protect us for long. I wasn’t planning on waiting, hunting being more my thing. Hell, given a chance at war, I’d roll around in it like a drunk in the gutter, hoping someone eventually found me and dragged me home, or at least into the next pub.

“Laila, our troubles east will have to be sorted out across the border.

For now, who would you expect to arrive first?"

"Hamport. It's the strongest of the major cities outside of Boss Sarpa's original holdings, and Boss Wheeler has a truce in place with Darius Peak in Stonnberg." Laila knew the state of Colivar's criminal underworld better than anyone on the continent. She knew their modes and motives.

Darius Peak certainly sounded like a weasel, a rich fething weasel, but he preferred a better moniker. The *Badger of Stonnberg* was a collector of power and shiny things. He wasn't one to venture too far from his accumulated horde, though he might supply Wheeler with some mercenaries given a strong enough reason or reward. Wealth was always a cause for strife and needed to be watched carefully on the darker shores of the realm, but converting it into power was a real challenge.

Southport's clans were still fighting among themselves, vying for dominance after Boss Sarpa disappeared a year and a half ago. Omarna's organization, far to the south, had always kept to itself, leaving us one less road to watch.

"Laila, what do you know about Wheeler?"

If the boss of Hamport had held off Sarpa's aggressive nature for years, he'd certainly want to remain independent and would surely take offense at any hint of an underworld prince.

"He lives off the flow of a major port and trades in everything. Darius Peak buys his contracts, and Wheeler provides him with protection along the way. Some of the contraband might be considered exotic, even by your standards."

"And what are my standards?"

Laila replied carefully, "Infernal standards. Rumor has it that Wheeler relies on doses of Black, imported from who knows where. The elixir provides a temporary burst of superhuman strength and speed to anyone that can keep it down."

"Any idea what it is or how it's made?"

"Not a clue. The Rippers of Murderhall were created in response to Wheeler's import business. Compared to the doses of Black, the Rippers offered a big improvement in terms of endurance but were a bitch to control."

“Does Darius Peak have access to this elixir?”

Having grown up a slave in the Gray House of Rathven, Cressida knew the game. “He must. How else would he dare have a partnership with Wheeler?”

Gray House deals were a finicky thing, requiring plenty of guarantees and the granting of hostages and boons. Level footing was a requirement.

“Rathven never had any partnerships, did they? They practically ruled Tannoo with their vaunted Black assassins, just like Boss Sarpa once ruled Maidenhall.”

Everyone knew of the Scarred Man, the Wind Catcher, and their objection to the presence of the Black in the capital cities of Colivar and Tannoo. Cressida Storm lived through that story and suffered every moment of every day when I wasn't holding her hand. My life was a constant exchange of humanity for the resolve needed to eradicate the Infernal curse from our land, and like a curse, any distance would certainly plague us both.

“Brother,” Laila sat down beside us, “Cress is a survivor. She won't fade away during your absence.”

A hundred unnecessary responses flew through my mind before something useful stuck. I looked across the room at Raven, “No, she won't, because the Gray Wind is going back to Fugaku.”

Judge Roger Small and Lynda Snow also attended the meeting with Ambassador Howa of Fugaku. If anyone knew the status of the Fuga House of Na'am, it would be Howa. With Colivar being the largest realm on the continent, the Ambassador had the unkind job of minimizing our King's displeasure, and when the King was busy, he got to deal with mine.

The Ambassador stuttered out a diplomatic greeting, “Wind Catcher, I'm glad to see you in good health.”

Once the Wind Catcher, always the Wind Catcher, and feth all to the Sovereign of Fugaku.

I looked like death warmed over but gave him credit for the effort and the use of my former Fuga title. “Ambassador, while I'm sure you've heard that I resigned my post before the Crown in Tannoo, I'm

here today to find out the standing of House Na'am and my current holdings in Fugaku."

Tila and Rebekah Na'am had coached me on how to reclaim our family's good name on both sides of the Fuga political arena, the Silver and the Gray.

"The Crown has yet to rule on the matter. Sovereign Doyne must allow a year of vacancy to pass before declaring your House and home dissolved. To lose a loyal House is a tragedy that she dares not face so soon after Rathven's demise."

"And if I officially reclaim my House and the stewardship thereof?"

"I am sorry, but the Crown will only recognize a blood claim in this matter. It seems that other Houses are trying to make the same claim in your name."

"Rhill?" I said.

"You are well informed. Angus Rhill wears your family's sword as a sign of your approval."

"I do approve of our connection, and I'm glad Boss Rhill remembers it. Still, I disapprove of his presumption concerning the permanent absence of House Na'am."

I nodded to Viren Drake. He opened the door, showing in a tall, slender woman dressed for any Royal Court.

"Ambassador, please inform the Crown that a blood claim has been made for the House of Na'am, witnessed by yourself as the Crown's officer in Colivar. Please provide us with a sealed copy of the claim by the end of the day."

"And whose blood will we be using?" he replied.

"Ambassador Howa, please meet Lady Rebekah Na'am and her husband, Viren Drake, both having served in the Fuga Crown's Intelligence and Recon Corps, respectively. Letters have already gone out with a request to commission Master Drake as a Major in the Fuga Recon Corps, leading the Hollen section. When I last spoke to Colonel Reno in Tannoo, the slot which had belonged to Lady Na'am's late brother remained unfilled, and Master Drake would be a most fitting replacement."

Ambassador Howa seemed to be having a hard time remembering that Viren Drake, Becks's husband, was still in the room. Becks

cleaned up well, and Howa had lost all power to object in the face of such beauty.

“Ambassador, Rebekah is Lord Almer Na’am’s oldest surviving child. If there is any further question about blood, please remind the Crown that I shed plenty of it for her this year and would appreciate an end to the scorn she has shown me.”

“I can assure you that she holds no ill will toward you,” said Howa. He hadn’t been there when I was forced to flee Tannoo.

“That may be the case, but all the same, please let her know that Lady Na’am has a new bodyguard, one that Sovereign Doyne will surely know. To guarantee Lady Rebekah’s safety, I have offered her the Gray Wind as she returns to her family’s estate in Hollen.”

“Not Tannoo?”

The Na’am family had significant holdings in the Fuga capital and would benefit from a closer relationship with the Crown, but Becks had already decided, “No, Hollen is far enough. Na’am still holds the governorship. Would Sovereign Doyne disagree?”

Howa smiled back, “Lady Na’am, how could she?”

Andarion was going too, a bodyguard for a bodyguard. While my heart seemed to be in a thousand pieces these days, my body still couldn’t be in two places at once. The Gray Wind, on the other hand, could.

I’d told Rae, “You’ll make a wonderful stand-in for Cressida.”

The look on her face had said otherwise.

Those that knew the Gray Wind best had died with the House of Rathven. Having decidedly different exotic looks, Raven and Cressida were about the same size, and both women were experts with a blade, though Rae was easily the more deadly of the two. Raven carried the soul shard of a *Kjaira* named *Rei-Seeck* wrapped around her heart and could face down whatever the Gray Houses of Tannoo might have left to throw at them. I hoped it wouldn’t come to that; the threat of the Gray Wind alone should be enough to keep them at bay.

It wouldn’t take long for a Fuga Recon section to arrive in Hollen to support Rebekah Na’am and her claim on the provincial city. Becks was more than capable of taking over for her dead father as Governor

and head of House Na'am, and she'd be well-protected. Raven could recruit additional help as they traveled through Hillsborn. The Ironbark Mountains were a haven for elves of all colors, and we intended to leverage Raven's royal influence in defense of our more eastern domains. With enough support, we could build a wall of influence to block any further incursions from the east and force the House of Rhill back into line, supporting our cause with the Crown in Tannoo.

Tila Na'am, daughter of Lord Na'am and the near victim of her father's schemes, agreed to be resurrected as Vigil Tila Wind of Colivar. She'd been assigned Lewis Marne, one of our five Realm Knight-Guards, as her bodyguard and was staying at Sturgess Hall with Lynda Snow and the rest of Company Storm. Tila was a few years older than me and well-trained in the art of observation. Her Seer talents were as exceptional as Lord Snow's for their distance, if not their clarity.

Captain Hartwell, a man newly smitten by Tila Na'am, hadn't needed too much convincing to move Company Storm into the Royal Quarter to keep her company. Having another, more stable Vigil in Maidenhall was priceless. It freed me to do what was necessary to calm the Gray waters while I fished for the Black.

Cressida would be staying in Maidenhall with Laila as planned, and I was still expected to keep my distance. Laila assured me that it was for the better, not for Raven or me, but rather for Cress. The assassin turned bodyguard needed to learn to stand on her own, building strength by surviving each day differently. After reminding Laila that I never kept my distance from her, at least not at first, she allowed me visiting rights the next time I was in town.

In the meantime, with Laila and Ben overseeing the security of Maidenhall, it was time for me to strike west toward the coast and the charming cities of southern Colivar.

Chapter 4

Bridges to Bridgeton

I nudged Ayla, “Why don’t you come out and say it?”

Ayla couldn’t hide her frustration beneath the excitement of working with her brother. “I won’t,” she replied. “Why kick a horse when it’s down?”

Truth be told, it wasn’t all that exciting as we scouted west along the Bull River road. We’d passed a few caravans and several barges with teams of mules toiling against the flow. We’d scanned everything for signs of underworld agents or assassins and had come up completely empty in our first three days.

“I’m a horse now, is that it?”

“You’ve got the long face for it, and you shake when you sleep.”

Our brood link seemed to work night and day, especially when I was unconscious and unable to control it. Ayla didn’t seem to control hers at all, allowing me to see and hear whatever she was experiencing whenever I focused on her mind.

“It wasn’t all that long ago that you were the only thing left in my mad world,” I said. “How am I doing now?”

“Better, much better, but I still don’t have to like everything about it or about you. Just when I thought Laila was ready to give you some breathing room, along comes Cressida burying her claws into you and stealing away your heart.” Ayla echoed Raven’s own sentiments when it came to the Fuga assassin.

“My heart, or what’s left of it, belongs to you as much as it does to the rest of my family.”

While the reply was certainly true, my family could be overly

demanding of my time and attention, and for a fifteen-year-old with only an older brother to watch over her, Ayla'sen Storm hadn't been getting enough of either. Her sadness at my flippant words halted me in my horse's tracks.

"You don't touch me," she said. "You hardly ever do, and nobody ever does with you or Laila always being around. Do I have to be sick or dying to get you to notice me?"

Ayla's long-held sadness and loss poured forth. "Laila is wrong, and you're wrong for sending everyone away. Distance doesn't help; it only hurts. You heal everyone with your touch, but you won't heal me. Why not? Am I so cursed?"

"Well, you are a woman," I said, hoping to lift her spirit with a smile. It almost worked.

Ayla broke down, crying on the side of the Bull River Road, an arm's length from her doltish brother. I lifted her from her saddle and placed the girl in front of me on Daur, wrapping my arms around her cold, slender frame.

"You aren't cursed, and you aren't sick," I whispered. "I can tell a poor heart from a true one, and yours is one of the strongest around."

Ayla had been through Hell in her short life but had weathered the storm better than most. She'd been the oldest child of the leader of a clan of heretics that dominated the Dungarr Basin on Colivar's eastern border. Her family and village no longer existed. She was claimed by decree as my little sister, and I couldn't have been more fortunate to have her in my life. She was fierce like Raven, yet vulnerable, and seemed to understand the devious side of our world as well or better than Laila, a woman more than twice her age.

Ayla spat away her tears. "And what does that get me besides another cold moment alone? Nobody understands that."

"Nobody? Do you remember who you're talking with right now?"

"Do you?" She may have had a point.

For once, I took a closer look. I held her hand and searched through our connection, the physical touch opening up paths I'd never checked before, and immediately, I felt ashamed for the emptiness I found surrounding her broken heart. Her soul had retreated, pushed away by the pain she carried. She hid from herself in an all too familiar way,

and no, I hadn't realized it. In my certainty and neglect, I hadn't even looked.

I'd grown up an orphan. Ayla had spent her life surrounded by a large extended family. They'd all died earlier this year due to their deals with demonic entities and my strong objection to the situation. Both Ayla and I had lost our hearts and minds in that horrible exchange, and while I had many in House Storm to find me and help me regain my footing, Ayla had only one.

After almost a year, we hadn't spoken about our time together in the Dungarr Basin. The end result left Ayla feeling like the last of her line. I'd always thought that there wasn't anything we could do or say to make it better, but I could no longer ignore the pain and isolation that defined the girl.

"Ayla," I opened myself fully, giving her an inner view of her brother that she'd never seen. "Please forgive me."

Her tears slowed at that moment, and her soul crept forward to take another look.

Feth Laila Storm's distance. It was time to try something new. I tied the lead of her horse to mine and resumed our ride toward the coast. Ayla's unbridled emotions and energy washed over me, giving me strength for the next step in our journey.

I slipped the claw dagger from the sheath strapped across her back. "An alpha *Kjaira* once told me that I tied the crudest of knots with my blood. They were right, and you were right to call me a savage for doing so."

Unbuckling my vambrace, I dug her exotic blade into my left arm, puncturing the skin beside a vivid old scar. I left the weapon in place and let the wound bleed.

Ayla moved to pull the dagger out.

"Wait," I said. "Let it bleed. Let the weapon feel the blood and grasp a new soul."

As we traveled onward, the afternoon trotting toward dusk, she finally took the blade from my arm, and as she did, my scarred and marbled heart called out to hers.

Kjaira of the Brood, like all demons, don't have hearts to brighten their thoughts and warm their souls. Sometimes, they crave those

connections and wrap their souls around ours when they find the chance to do so. Empty at first, the *Kjaira* dagger that Ayla held now carried a small shard of a checkered soul, one soul woven between us, and her heart was blanketed with the same mix of souls, both light and dark, like that which lived around mine. I watched as the new weave settled into place, a new pattern, and marveled as she let go of her sorrow.

She rubbed the blood from the claw-blade across her cheeks, an offering to her family and ancestors. “You are forgiven for everything,” she said. “Even your neglect.”

With our union of souls, Ayla would never feel alone again. It was the healing power of my blood, a savage suture for hearts that have been broken, and a shortcut that I chose to take when I knew I wouldn’t have the time and attention needed to heal her the right way. The fact that she forgave me healed me in ways I couldn’t describe, but she knew. She would always know from now on, and in time, she would heal herself fully.

I finally spoke, another mile farther down the road, “Old Skarim must be regretting the loss of Brabin about now, don’t you think?”

Skarim had been the Elder Bone-man of her tribe. He’d ended his days having the soul ripped from his body and devoured by the Infernal Emperor that they worshipped. Ayla should have been married off to his oldest son Brabin when she’d turned thirteen, but for some reason, her father, Clan Chief Tilikum, had objected to the arranged marriage. He’d certainly hedged his bets before he died.

Ayla shuddered at the thought, “Whatever happened to Brabin?”

“Still holding a torch for him, are you? Well, last I’d heard, Captain Hartwell removed his head at the beginning of the Battle for Lockrun.”

She leaned back and rubbed her bloody cheek against mine. “Thank you for sharing.”

“I’m sorry.” I had a thousand excuses that I might have offered but left it at that. There was no excuse for ignoring Ayla in her time of need.

“You really are a mess, you know. You almost make Cressida look sane.”

“There may have been some wisdom in my aunt’s call for keeping

everyone at a safe distance from her favorite nephew.”

Ayla already knew why. “You showed yourself to her, didn’t you?”

“We were fully dressed the whole time.”

“That explains why Laila’s afraid of you now. You’ve both changed a lot since you first met.”

I searched Ayla but didn’t find the same fear that Laila harbored. I guess the trick was starting out at your lowest point when meeting a person for the first time. Instead, Ayla carried an old fear of being abandoned by her family and left behind as the sole survivor. With my line of work, that was still a likely outcome.

“Is there anyone besides me that you trust?” I asked.

Tila’s face flashed into my mind, a bittersweet hint from Ayla.

“Tila’s a great sister to have,” I said. “If anything happens to me, she’ll be there for you.”

“How do you know that?” Ayla whispered.

“Your heart told me, and I’ve seen hers,” I replied. “Now, before I put you back on your horse, would you please wrap my arm and buckle up my vambrace. *Sorrow* just killed a man a mile up the road.”

The scent of the assassin was unique. Just off the road, the corpse grew sour, and the drippings of violence overwhelmed our senses. A death-demon would have spotted this killer a mile away and had, breaking the man’s neck and taking most of the man’s right arm as payment, a toll in the name of the Scarred Man of Maidenhall. Besides the man’s fine horse, we found the markings of an underworld agent and little else. The animal, a coffee-colored gelding, was close in caliber to my horse, Daur, and it bore a Westlake brand. The daggerman carried his weapons inside his leather vest and a few broken vials of unsavory substances in a pouch across his back.

We had two options with the killer’s body. We could make it disappear into the woods nearby as an offering to the local wolves. This would leave the contracting boss without any clue about the hitman’s demise. On the other hand, we could attempt to return it and see where it led us. Being more in need of information than security, we tied the body across the back of the assassin’s horse and continued our ride toward Bridgeton with the fine gelding in tow. After three days scouting a river, we were going fishing, after all.

Chapter 5

Herds and Bosses

A city of well-tapped potential, Bridgeton straddled the Bull River. It leveraged a broad stone bridge, the intersection of the Hamport and Southport roads, and the barge lanes that serviced Maidenhall far upstream. As an inland storage, trading, and shipping hub, it boasted a population of tens of thousands as well as numerous herds of mules, horses, and other livestock. Its vast set of docks and wide turning basin provided a starting point for the flow of all sorts of goods from its warehouse district and livestock pens.

The city had a Crown-appointed Lord-Mayor but was ruled for the most part by a three-headed boss. Having once ruled the lanes to Southport by proxy, Laila had given us a rundown on the existing Gray Triad along with their known neighborhoods and haunts.

We'd reached the end of our ride westward with limited success—one dead assassin wasn't going to stem the tide of an aggressive Gray House response—and I didn't know what to make of the paltry effort. Perhaps Maidenhall wasn't their target at all.

On our arrival in Bridgeton, we decided to split up, selecting different stops in our search for opportunities and threats. Ayla rode in first, allowing me to keep an eye on her from a distance as she hunted for the right inn to begin her work. Towing a fine example of a horse, one carrying an even finer example of a dead man, I should have stopped at the bailiff's post first but figured I'd use the cadaver as bait while it was still fresh. I'd rubbed a few drops of my blood into the saddles of our three horses, knowing *Sorrow* could easily track them if they happened to wander off.

Appearing to be the daughter of a merchant from the East, Ayla found a spot in the heart of the town's warehouse district. Noting the number of watchers circling the block around the Wicked Worm Inn, her brave choice would have made Laila and Ben proud. Every corner and even a few roofs had men in place. As she went inside, I rode on past, heading for another neighborhood with the hostile feeling of underworld eyes on my back.

The taverns in the basin area were filled with the worn crews of barges and stevedores, but one pub, in particular, had its own professional clientele. The set of regulars hid their emotions but not their lethal intent. It would do.

The vacuum created by the disappearance of Boss Sarpa had been filled by his former rivals and underlings. Bridgeton was run by underbosses representing the nearest sizable cities: Southport, Westlake, and Hamport. It was a recent arrangement that would likely shake out to a single boss, depending on the skill and commitment of the players. In the meantime, it was a fortunate setup that could be leveraged and offer me a one in three chance of scoring on my first stop in town. My goal was simple: to eat a good meal and let the eyes of the locals do the rest. It didn't take them long to take the bait.

I nudged Ayla through our brood bond as she sat a dozen blocks away in the dining room of the Wicked Worm. We hadn't completely finished our earlier conversation, and I wanted her to know that her brother was still paying attention.

"That's quite a fine horse you have out front," said a voice from behind me. It wasn't a threatening tone.

The Empty Barge Pub was busy, and I'd found it impossible to get a table safely tucked along a wall. I'd used my nose and my other senses to count the cold spots, all twenty of them, and at least make sure that I was seated facing the right direction. Very few would stick around in such a vulnerable setting; it was a shameless cry for attention on my part.

"Which one?" I said, not even looking back.

The food on my plate was still warm and better prepared than I'd expected. The room had quieted down, listening in on the new conversation or simply waiting for a sign to make a move against the

heavily armed interloper.

"The black one looks like it belongs to a prince or something." The opening remark hammered into my stone-cold expression, chipping it a bit.

I took another bite, considering my response. "It belonged to someone else, but they're dead now. You into horses? I've got an extra mount to sell."

"The Westlake beauty?" A smallish man of middling years dropped himself into the chair across the table from me. "The one toting that dead bottle-man?"

His was a simple message of introduction, but the man's surprise startled us both. I bet he was expecting someone far older. I hadn't heard the term 'bottle-man' before but assumed it had to do with the assassin's pack of potentially dangerous elixirs.

I offered my own message of introduction, "That's the one. I found it parked on the side of the King's River Road several miles upriver. Interested in making a deal?"

"Not sure I could afford to keep both it and the body," said the man.

"The body doesn't eat much, and you can always dump it if it complains."

The guy was playing it cool but lost his concentration with my simple observation.

"Doesn't eat much?" He stumbled into a smile and placed his hands flat on the table before him, calming the room around us. "My name's Keller. What brings you here, friend?"

Laila had mentioned the name 'Keller' during our discussion of the Bridgeton Triad. He was connected to the Westlake cabal, which would be appropriate since we were sitting in a Westlake pub.

"My friends call me 'Gray,'" I said, pointing to my hair. "I'm merely traveling between jobs, trying to return a lost horse."

"And what do you do?"

"I'm a hunter or a mercenary, depending on the situation and whoever's calling the shots. I favor the least appealing targets."

The man kept glancing over my shoulder, checking on his teller, one with a *clear sight* ability to detect an untruth. They were standing out of my reach but still far too close for their own safety's sake. They

had to be good if they could read me without seeing my face.

With all the watchers I'd passed on the street, Keller might have been expecting me, and I took another scan about the room, searching for the bowmen and the ice-cold concentration needed to aim at my neck.

"Mister Gray, it seems like you're in the right part of Bridgeton, maybe even the right pub if you're looking for a job. Do you have any references?" Keller was a cool customer, keeping me talking and distracted as he sorted me out.

By the man's earlier interest in fine horses and his confident attitude, he had to be, at a minimum, the second for the Westlake underboss in this part of town. Still, I suspected he might be the underboss himself, trying to sort out a stranger without wasting anyone's time or shedding everyone's blood. Keller made a real effort to avoid a threatening attitude. It was a rare temperament in my Gray House experience and one to be valued if we both walked out of this pub alive.

"The boss of Hillsborn hangs on my every word." I smiled, waiting for the confirmation and disbelief to reach Keller's eyes.

Hillsborn was a small but active trading city on Colivar's southeastern border. The boss there was hardcore in his methods but lacked any real imagination, favoring blunter weapons, and we'd quickly come to a solid understanding about who called the shots for whom. By declaring my influence over another boss, and a belligerent one at that, I'd landed squarely in the realm of the Gray Prince.

Keller remained perfectly still, offering a polite reply, "I see."

His eyes locked on my shoulder and the hilt of my broadsword. The man's confidence grew tainted with fear. Perhaps he hadn't believed the rumors and reports, or maybe he couldn't match the young face to the gray mane sitting at his table. His mind raced, probably sorting through numerous options as a way out of the web in which he sat.

Having flat out ruined Keller's night, if not his establishment and his life, I watched his eyes closely, gauging his intention to react in an unsafe way. I wasn't here to start a war, preferring to end one to my advantage, and I was certainly the more desperate one in that regard.

I continued in an even tone, hoping for a lead instead of a room full

of violence, “Back to the Westlaker, know where I can find an interested buyer for the mount? Maybe the original owner would like to negotiate on a price, a simple finder’s fee to keep things on the level.”

Keller took a breath. “Are you content to sit here and barter about a horse?”

Yes, I was. My life was a daily call to violence, and my heart had been scarred beyond recognition, unfit for my beloved wife. This wasn’t easily explained from the chair in which I sat, but I provided another clue, one far more daunting than the last. I tried to keep it gentle.

“Leveraging the mortal wisdom of Mono Rathven, let’s start small and see where things go.”

The late Mono Rathven had been the head of the most dominant Gray House in Fugaku. He’d bet heavily on his dark deals and lost everything to the Wind Catcher; his entire House had died with him in a single night. Word had to have gotten around, and a perceptive man like Keller would certainly understand the reference.

Keller didn’t blink. His decision made, he chuckled, suddenly confident in his good fortune. “It seems I may have been right about that black gelding after all.”

Not one to hedge, Keller was taking a big risk, but I needed to be sure that he was all in.

“Who owned the horse?” I said.

Keller impressed me. “Mister Gray, why would you care about a single horse when you could own the whole herd?”

Chapter 6

The Gray Princess

It was a simple thing, walking into that den, but getting out would prove to be more complicated. The proximity of Southport to Bridgeton left the turning basin town replete with Southport agents, and they all seemed to converge in and around the Wicked Worm Inn throughout the night. Ayla's exotic, waifish looks caught many a man's attention, and she shivered through their cold stares as she sauntered through the common room and parked herself at a small table near the fireplace. From there, as a clearly harmless interloper, she could see all the important corners and begin her work.

A giant of a man approached. With his intense eyes and the ragged scar on his chin, he didn't look like an inn's proprietor. "You lost, little one?"

Ayla often felt lost but not at that moment. She was in the exact right place, and soon, the time would be right too.

"I'm Ayla," she held out her hand. "I just rode into town with my brother, but he's off seeing a man about a horse and left me here to warm up."

"I'm Cork. Is your brother a horse trader?" The strong man was careful not to crush her hand in greeting.

"You could say that. He likes to cut deals all around the continent. Too many, if you ask me, but would you happen to know of any horse traders I could meet while I'm waiting?"

"The Westlake crew would be more interested in horses than the locals in this place. Southport has its hands full at the moment."

"You're from Southport?" Ayla noted the man's candid remark,

unsure if it was a slip or one made intentionally. *Likely the latter.*

"Once. I caught a barge up to Bridgeton twelve years ago and haven't looked back. Southport always had too much going on."

"And now look at you, right back in the middle of it, no?"

Their vague conversation seemed almost natural, springing forth with ease after the handshake.

"Yep," he smiled. "Where'd you come from anyway?"

"East. Out by Dungarr. I'd also be glad if you pointed out anyone here that I should avoid while I wait for my brother."

The man gazed about the room as if seeing it for the first time, making eye contact with several others working the room. A small shake of his head told them to leave the girl alone. They could check things out again when her brother showed up. The girl was odd and an oddity in this place, and he didn't like that. It didn't make any sense. He decided to take a walk and check with his watchers around the block.

After the man left, Ayla took the long route to the bar counter, stopping by a corner table where a pair of severe men were being ignored by the rest of the room. She'd somehow managed to cut her finger on the way.

"Cork said I should stop by and meet you. My name is Ayla, and I've just arrived from Maidenhall." She held out her hand in greeting. The word 'Maidenhall' forced the men to stop their muted conversation and acknowledge her unwanted presence.

The shorter of the two was the Southport boss; she was sure of it. He leaned back with his arms crossed after a quick shake of her hand and let the other man deal with the interruption. Neither one introduced himself.

The second started out carefully, "You have news from Maidenhall?" He was a man with curly black hair and a poorly trimmed beard that clashed with his fine-fitting clothes.

"I have it on good authority that they've acquired the Black and are coming for Bridgeton." Ayla took hold of the men's attention with her opening salvo. She hated to be ignored, even by strangers, and her abridged truth had the desired effect, even if neither man seemed to believe it.

After a moment's contemplation, the second hissed, "You're trying

to tell us that Wheeler has sold us out? Next, you'll be telling us they've hired the Gray Wind from Tannoo."

Ayla offered them her most evil grin. "You're better informed than I'd first thought."

The boss shifted, uncomfortable with the truth found by his limited *clear sight* ability. "Feth, where's Cork?"

"I think he took a walk. I'm happy to wait here until he returns if you've got something I could eat."

The look on the boss's face spoke volumes about his patience, masking the joy he surely felt at having his night interrupted. He figured the young woman knew only enough to be a danger to herself. "Why don't you have a seat by the fire, and Lilly will bring you something."

Ayla considered his suggestion and sat down beside the second, pulling his plate over. He'd hardly touched his meal, and she figured it would be safer than a plate of her own.

"I forgot to mention that my brother will be stopping by soon for some horse-trading. He'll want to know if you're interested before wasting everyone—everyone's time," she coughed.

The boss took over the conversation with the persistent girl, "Miss, we're not really much into horses, but what kind does your brother offer?"

He was ready to call for Banyan, his barge running slaver, and have the girl shipped upstream for good. He'd profit as much from her disappearance as he'd been put off by her sudden show.

"The blackest." She drew her claw dagger and stabbed a potato from the boss's lukewarm meal. It tasted better than it looked, especially with each man leaning back from the dark gray blade and the dried blood it still carried. "Does Southport have anything to trade in that regard? Ah, here comes Master Cork."

A moment later, the oversized agent opened the front door, ducking his head to get through. His hands were covered in blood. He froze at the sight of Ayla sitting at the corner table, and she waved to him from across the room.

"Six," she whispered to the boss.

"Six what?" he shot back, but Ayla only shrugged as Cork arrived.

Cork could see the damage was already done. “Miss, you’d do better back at your own table by the fire.”

The boss tried to make some sense out of the evening’s rapidly devolving scene, “Cork, before we end our conversation with this young woman, why are you bleeding?”

“Not mine. We lost just six watchers. A third of our crew on this block is dead, and no one saw a thing.”

A rumble pounded across the roof above, like two heavy men running, one after the other.

“Seven is my favorite number,” Ayla announced to those interested. She’d wanted their absolute, undivided attention, and she got it. “But not so for the Gray Wind. She prefers larger counts and warmer rooms.”

Cork’s face turned deep red, matching his hands. “The Gray Wind? What the Hell does that have to do with anything?”

“I was merely telling the boss here how Maidenhall had acquired the services of Tannoo’s finest assassin. Another of my brother’s legendary trades, and one he figures to barter for a whole herd of horses if you’ve got any for sale. He prefers the ones from Hampport for some reason.”

She knew more than enough to leave the three men speechless, and their silence determined their fates.

Ayla stood. “No? Then perhaps I should leave and let Miss Magata finish up.”

“The Gray Wind is a Magata?” Cork asked.

“The same, but I like you, Master Cork. I’ll be sure to put in a good word.” Ayla wiped her hand on her leather pants. “And I’d wash my hands if I were you. She has a thing for blood.”

The boss looked at his own hands and the dried blood on the young woman’s face. “Miss, whoever you are, I don’t think you should be leaving just yet. In fact, nobody leaves here without *my* permission.”

Ayla laughed in her most carefree manner, “You sounded like Boss Sarpa for a moment. Too bad the next dozen men to die would disagree, seeing as my partner will continue her work until I come outside.”

The boss looked to Cork, getting a nod from the big man. “Feth, but

why'd you pick this place?"

"Because you did, and because Sarpa never granted Southport the permission to abandon their long-running partnership with Maidenhall." Ayla's tone matched the ice that glazed each man's eyes. "Sorry that we couldn't do business, but with the dawn, if any of you still breathe, you ought to tell your handlers downstream. Good night."

Knowing that Ara was having a lot more success in his chosen neighborhood, she'd layered it on thick, speaking this last bit to the entire room and leaving everyone pinned beneath her sincerity. Either she was a lunatic or telling the truth, but after her convincing performance, it didn't entirely matter. She'd delivered her message and marked her victims.

Burdened by its intercity conflicts, Southport maintained a weak hold on its position in the Bridgeton Triad. They were poorly managed and had far too many hands milling around, drawing attention in a pretense of strength. Ben Heck could clean them out in a week, but *Sorrow*, standing in for the Gray Wind, would loosen their grip on Bridgeton and shatter their resolve in a single night. *Sorrow* was a night stalker, an eastern black panther harboring the soul of a death-demon with a brood connection to Ayla. Its deviousness had but one end.

"Master Cork, if I don't see you again, I will be sad." Ayla wanted to tell the big man to take the night off but could only offer a small wave as she walked out the door, daring the room to stop her.

The street and adjacent rooftops watched silently in the cold, humid night as she climbed upon her horse and rode off. A stuttering hiss flowed like a breeze from the shadows around her.

Chapter 7

The Bottle-man's Ghost

The fence circling the corral carried the saddles of forty riders. The herd inside was impressive, and the horses were nervous as they milled about. A block behind me, *Sorrow* scouted the stockyard lanes looking for trouble.

Keller straddled his new horse, a Westlake beauty with blood stains on its saddle, as we examined the pen holding the forty moonlit steeds. He was proud of what he'd found. "Mister Gray, with great risk comes great reward, wouldn't you say?"

"With great power comes great pain," I replied, making sure he knew where this was going. "How much for the entire herd, tack, and all?"

Seeing a new way forward, Keller chuckled at his good fortune. "Are you buying or selling?"

He was the underboss of Westlake for the Bridgeton Triad and still had to contend with rivals from Southport and Hampport. The enclosed field spreading before us belonged to a Southport agent, and Keller had paid off a local watcher, allowing us to take a look without hurting anyone's feelings.

A whistle behind us split the night, warning the underboss that we weren't alone. Ayla approached. I felt her excitement shine like a lamp in the night, and with it, a tinge of smoky sadness.

"Both." I hopped off of Daur.

Ayla looked around, not saying a word, reading the scene. She finally clasped my outstretched hand and slid from her saddle, leaning into my embrace. At her touch, the fear and sorrow came through loud

and clear.

"I've asked too much of you," I whispered. "I'm sorry."

Her father had done the same. His demanding nature had helped her survive beyond the lives of her entire family. Still, surviving takes its toll.

"How do you do it?" she whispered back. "Those men were like the horses in this pen."

"Ayla'sen, we're all horses in someone's pen, even your brother. Of course, that excludes certain rare eastern birds."

"Skip the poetic feth for once and just hold me."

I could do that.

The darkness eased from her heart, coaxed away by my touch. As her breathing returned to its easy cadence, Ayla returned to the script of our nocturnal visit.

"Given a long-owed rebuke, Southport suffered the Gray Wind," she spoke clearly, barely loud enough for Keller to catch the key words.

I could feel the coldness, Ayla's distaste at being a part of the continuing play. Being a fifteen-year-old girl with the heart and cleverness to influence and protect, Ayla focused mostly on her brother. By using her, I was hardening her heart, placing it in a cage with cold iron and demon claws for company. My aunt Laila's words about distance were beginning to make more sense to me now, even if we disagreed. In a war for my survival, I was pure poison to those around me and a curse for Ayla Storm.

"Master Keller, please meet my sister Ayla. She tells me that Southport's claim on Bridgeton has faltered, leaving us with a new landscape to negotiate."

"Miss Gray, I am happy to make your acquaintance and glad we're all interested in Bridgeton's potential."

"Do you have the standing to speak for the Master of Westlake in this matter?" I wanted an agreement in place before I moved on to bigger cities.

I was buying Westlake's near-term support, handing them full control of Bridgeton in exchange for a herd of Hamport hitmen. It was an offer they couldn't refuse.

The boss smiled. "I do, with one modification to our earlier

agreement.”

“What else could you want?”

“Her,” he said, pointing at Ayla. “As a guarantee of safety from the forces you’ve marshaled under your princely domain.”

Keller had brought along an even eight henchmen for our trip to the livestock section of the city. They formed a vigilant circle around us, eyes focused outward, ears listening in. I could feel them stir as the negotiations took a serious turn and realized that they were focused on me as the real threat. Even the horses in the corral shuffled about, sensing the presence of something darker in their midst.

“Master Keller, I’m handing you Bridgeton and one fine horse in the deal. Are you including the hold of Westlake in the dowry for my sister?”

There was always a price to pay for power.

“If I did?” Keller replied. He was actually considering it.

Feth, but I couldn’t hedge.

Thinking of the long night ahead and the unpleasant tasks left to do, I gave Keller my most cynical response, “The answer would still be ‘No,’ though if you have a son to offer, I’d be glad to take him, ensuring that your bloodline survives any future treachery.”

Ayla cut in with a calmer, saner mind, “Would it bring a lasting peace between your Houses?”

“Ayla, it would guarantee the death of hundreds if you were ever harmed.”

“I have a son, Bear,” Keller spoke quickly. “He works for Ganos, the holder of Westlake. Bear’s presence there lessens the potential for conflict by making any betrayal extremely personal.”

That fact that he’d handed his son to Westlake confirmed Keller’s dominant position in that partnership.

“Does your son have wings? Can he visit you whenever he wants?” I asked.

“I can visit you whenever I want,” Ayla pointed out a fairly new fact. With it sheathed across her back, she brushed the claw-dagger, jolting me with her touch. “And *Sorrow* can stay to protect me.”

I excused us for the moment, taking Ayla on a short walk around the horse pen to examine the assassins’ tack, checking it for clues and

scents, some more familiar than others. *Sorrow* was circling in toward our position, following another scent. Something was sour in Bridgeton.

"Why?" I said, stirred at the thought of losing Ayla. I hadn't created our souls' connection for her benefit alone.

"Because I know what you must do tonight and what you will do a fortnight from now and two months after that. With the unending demands of being Vigil Storm and the sorcerer of our brood, your heart carries far too many claw marks and burdens."

"But you're the stalker of our brood, and we complement each other well."

"Yes, we do. Too well. We always have and always will," she replied. "No matter where we are or into which ground we've been staked."

She should never be staked anywhere.

"Ayla—"

"Ara, I wish I owned you like you own me, like you own Raven and Laila and Cress. Bridgeton or Westlake will have to do."

She only saw a half of it. Ayla owned me just like Raven and Laila and Cress and a host of others, but it wasn't enough. She certainly deserved far more from the one person she thought of as her family. She'd saved my life twice in the year that I'd known her. *Or was it three times?* The least that I could do was save hers and pay my respects to the body of whichever boss thought to control her.

"You will always be my little sister."

"I know." She didn't sound thrilled, but I could feel her heart beating stronger than it had a day ago.

I had one last, selfish question for her. "What if I need to be saved again?"

"We both know that's a given. *Sorrow* and I will find you when you do."

"There's a Vigil in Westlake, Vigil Stone."

"Then you'll have a good reason to visit, won't you?"

"I don't know Westlake. I don't know Ganos or even Keller, really. What if you're unhappy?"

"You'll know. I won't hide myself from you."

And there it was—the end game of everything in my life. Keeping a safe distance had always been my strong suit with those that I loved, and this war had become personal in ways I'd never imagined.

We walked back to Keller, double-checking the scents, the script rewritten. *Sorrow* was circling the horse pen, sniffing at the saddles that lined it.

“Master Keller, we have considered your offer and come to an agreement. I must warn you that Ayla is backed by more than a mild-mannered brother. Her sisters are plenty dangerous and will likely thrash me for making this deal, but please know that they can always reach you, just as I can always reach Ayla wherever she may be. Tomorrow, a sister will be present, protecting Ayla, and I expect both to be treated as part of the same House and with the utmost regard. I'll know the moment that this is not the case. Furthermore, if she needs to see her family, she'll be escorted wherever they may be, without question. Again, I will know.”

Keller was making a deal with the devil, and he'd get what he asked for.

I continued stating the terms, “In return, you will have your marriage to the Scarred Man, and we will all consider Westlake and Bridgeton independent yet loyal cousins of Maidenhall. Eventually, we will return Southport to the family fold and force an end to the war between the Houses of southern Colivar. Boss Sarpa is gone, but his ghost lives on. Of all the Gray Houses, Maidenhall has the reputation and the capability to match. Under my watch, we will maintain a truce and a balance for the communities in which we exist. Do you agree?”

“Entirely.” Keller seemed perfectly pleased with the terms and his sudden turn of fortune. “And Hamport?”

“What about them?”

A growl in *Sorrow* was slowly building, and the horses in the pen were shifting about.

“They've shown an incredible lethality of late in their push to control Bridgeton. We've only been able to overcome them with numbers and surprise, and now they've sent us this.” Keller nodded toward the field full of riderless horses.

“How long have they been here?”

"I'm not sure. They trickled into town uncounted, but we've got a hand in the Southport crew that feeds us Hamport news. Not everyone is happy with the local alliance or its results."

"Tell me you have watchers on the docks," I said.

"We do. A line of three barges went out earlier tonight on the south side, heading upstream and riding high. They were double teamed, and we were glad to hear of their departure."

"You and everyone else, I imagine." I was eyeing the bottle-man's ghost as it sat atop Keller's new horse, unnoticed by the rest. "Master Keller, now that our deal is done, who owned the bottle-man?"

"Hamport," he replied.

A cough echoed from my right, from an elderly eastern gentleman leaning against the corral fence. Another phantom, he wasn't laughing like his brother, but instead showed a face full of regret for his desperate deals gone bad.

I blinked, and my surrogate father was gone, replaced by a muted black shadow that slid over the fence, followed by a dozen more. The last assassin over was yanked backward into the pen, a scuff and a crack signaling its demise. I grabbed Ayla and lifted her onto the back of Daur, slapping its rear as she grabbed the reins. Instead of angling away for an escape, she spun the animal in place and bolted toward the horse pen, plowing through the oncoming assassins. Daur barreled forward and leaped over the corral's fence, landing in the middle of the herd with Ayla leaning low to its neck.

The boss and his eight bodyguards had reacted well, backing away and forming a line. An alien scent filled the night as a dozen more killers raced up the alley towards their backs. The sound of weapons clearing their scabbards announced the foes' attack at the last moment. Keller's men spun to meet them.

I moved too, chasing Daur's dark tail into the middle of the twelve assassins that had emerged from the corral. "Play!" I screamed, turning their broken momentum and sour-tasting souls against them.

With the soul of *Madd-Jak* emerging from my ring, my fang-dagger got the first kill before the group even noticed me among them. I punched a hole in the forehead of the nearest next, and *Exile* unleashed its berserker fury on three more. The men were quick,

clearly faster than normal Gray House killers, but their pestilent blood acted as a beacon, the unworldly scent of a Black potion called to me, allowing me to act and react without hesitation in the blood-strewn darkness.

While the assailants were all somehow magically cloaked, many had further masked their approach by sneaking through the herd of horses. Their well-used saddles nearby had helped too, as had our surety that they were elsewhere, barging west on the Bull River.

The herd's calm demeanor evaporated, and it began a circular stampede around the corral, following the big black gelding in their midst. Screams sounded in the corral, and several black-clad hunters were trampled under hooves or knocked about by the crazed animals. Other assassins simply disappeared beneath it all or were thrown bodily over the fence, landing with necks or legs bent at impossible angles. On some, limbs were missing altogether.

The assassins had consumed a Black curse, and I pulled hard on the familiar presence among us, draining their newfound strength and pushing it back out as fury through my broadsword and dagger. My reach for the tainted energy extended to the men behind me and those still maneuvering for their lives within the corral. It fueled my resolve. Having lost their unreal catalyst, the Hamport attackers faltered to a man. The minds of the assassins lit up in frustration and fear as their movements slowed to normal and their swords failed to reach their intended targets.

Throughout the fight, I stayed open and connected with Ayla seeing and feeling her situation and allowing her to see and feel the melee around me. I couldn't leave her alone in the chaos as the situation devolved, erupting with the iron-scent of blood and scattered foes. Ayla's tight grip on her claw-dagger seemed to indicate that she agreed. A black shepherd eventually turned the herd toward the sturdy wooden fence, forcing it to halt. *Sorrow* continued to scout the pen, looking for any momentary survivors, while I guided Daur with Ayla out a side gate. I nudged *Sorrow*, telling her to circle wide and check the adjacent blocks for survivors. We'd killed close to forty men, but I hadn't been keeping a solid count.

The paddock around us was silent, except for the moans of a few.

Keller knelt on the ground beside one of his men, looking ready to join him, and only two of his guards remained standing. Both survivors remained keyed up, their sabers still in hand, and they eyed me warily, knowing that I could easily kill two birds with one stone. Keller looked up at me expectantly as he fought his pain.

"Fight's over," I said. "We need to move you to safety before Hamport shows up to collect our bodies."

Keller shook his head and waved to his men. He didn't speak but instead removed his ring and handed it to me as they watched. He pointed at Ayla, "Deal—Bear," he coughed through gritted teeth, slumping onto his side.

Ayla stepped back, but I shook my head. Master Keller was still the boss of Bridgeton, if only by a thread. His shallow, raspy breath continued for the moment.

"Bridger and Foles," said the shorter of the two bodyguards. "What do we do?"

"My name is Ara, and this is Ayla. Get Keller strapped onto his horse and to a doctor," I ordered. "She'll follow you."

"Wait, we can't move him like this." Ayla drew her claw-dagger and placed it in Keller's bloody hand.

The effect was immediate, the shared pain duller than I expected, but the intense pull of energy from Ayla and me made us sway for a second. The strong will of Master Keller had found a way forward, matching Ayla's as she finished tying the blade securely in place in the boss's weak grip.

"Where are you going?" Ayla watched with concern as they lifted Keller onto his new horse. She wasn't ready to be abandoned yet.

"Nowhere. Take Daur and *Sorrow* with you. The Gray Prince has one more visit to make tonight, and I'll find you when I'm done."

Chapter 8

Doses of Black

The vials seemed to contain black blood and smelled like a combination of Hell and high-spirited water. Whoever drank that had to feel the burn all the way down. Most of the dead bodies had a spare. None had lived long enough to need it.

The dead men lacked any rings or necklaces that could shade their presence, so I had to assume the doses of Black had somehow accomplished that feat. Throughout the fast fight, I'd only picked up the sour scents of Pestilence and Death, the assassins' minds, empty of all fear and emotion, were neither hot nor cold, and they'd managed to catch us by surprise. The mad dash by Daur and the rampaging horse herd had sown confusion long enough for us to counterattack, and my ability to siphon off their Black energy had staggered them.

I picked the best pair of horses that one could find from the orphaned herd and saddled up both, adding the body of the first assassin to emerge from the corral. After tying both mounts to the fence outside the pen, I sat down in a deep shadow nearby and waited, examining the Black doses with a little help. I drew the fang of *Koki-Ten*. The seven-inch dagger had a devious power all its own, a power I hoped to leverage as the night waned.

Koki-Ten recognized its own, howling in my head, "*Blood of the Get!*"

"Your blood?" I thought.

"No. *blood of the Get, soaked in my soul. Drawn from one of the Damogir's finest warriors. You should recognize it by now.*"

I'd certainly been soaked in the blood of the *Get*, but a rawer form

and without the stale liquor mixed in.

"The Damogir is selling their blood?"

"No. The Contract maker wouldn't allow it."

"Who holds this Contract?"

"The Damogir."

"He must be desperate for the coin. Armies cost a lot to equip and feed."

"Why don't you drink it?" the demon prodded.

Koki-Ten gave me an offer that I had to refuse. My unbalanced state wouldn't tolerate alcohol, let alone the soul drop of an alpha *Kjaira*, and my heart still carried the scars to prove it.

"Better yet, why don't you?" I replied.

The first man to appear was only a watcher; his eyes scanned the many bodies scattered about the yard. He counted more than forty before running back down the alley in confusion and dismay.

Ayla nudged me, showing the courtyard of a sizable stone manor and Boss Keller being lifted carefully from his horse. *Sorrow* sat unnoticed atop one of the twelve-foot-tall walls that outlined the place, allowing me to relax for a moment. It was obvious that a *Kjaira* could hide in plain sight, going undetected if it chose to do so. A shadow-cat was the ultimate assassin but still vulnerable once detected.

The watcher returned, his nervousness ringing like a cracked bell as a group of nine more followed him into the gruesome scene. I covered the stone in my ring, not wanting Madd-Jak to peer out at the wrong moment and flash a warning of our presence.

"There's at least a dozen more in the corral," said the watcher. "Bad things happened there."

"Quick, anyone can see that bad things have happened all around here, so why would the pen be any different?" A tall man with a seemingly permanent smile took in the slaughter from the middle of the group. He had short blonde hair and a finely cut riding jacket and, despite his smile, was anything but happy.

The shaky watcher ducked his head and stepped back. The group's leader was deeply disappointed in the outcome of the ambush but acted less than concerned, and I wanted to punch him, hoping to stop

my mind from itching at his disconnected manner.

"Check for the black vials," he ordered. "There should be extras or at least empties if the fight went as bad as it seems. And find Keller's body. It should be here too."

That was my cue. I stood up and walked over to my pair of saddled horses, ignoring the men as they searched the bodies around me.

The boss finally took notice of me as I sheathed my fang-dagger and made ready to mount up. "Who's that you've got on your horse?"

"My partner, why?" Still wearing the night's blood, I looked like a Hamport assassin. I'd soaked in the desperate scene around me and the anxiety of the men as they worked, cloaking my mind as only a survivor would.

The blonde man ignored my response but didn't question my presence. "Did you see Boss Keller?"

"Who the feth are you?" I replied. I was a killer coming off a low and didn't have to act friendly.

This seemed to frustrate the man in charge. He became even more irate as his men came up empty in their quest for the doses of Black. "I'm Coad. I run the show for Boss Wheeler down here in Bridgeport."

Coad was another familiar name, thanks to Laila Storm.

"Some show. I'll be sure to tell Wheeler all about it when I get to Hamport."

The boss didn't like that answer. "What happened here?"

"More like what didn't. The black rum didn't work. Wheeler's losing his touch, and if I were you, I'd be feeling a bit naked about now."

"Why?"

"The Gray Wind and the Scarred Man are in town. Who do you think pulled Keller's ass out of here?"

"Keller's alive?"

"And more than a little pissed, I bet. I'm not waiting around for Westlake to come in and clean house."

"We can handle them," Coad assured his men.

"By yourself? Didn't you hear that Southport is already considering running after a visit tonight from the Gray Wind?"

"The Gray Wind is only an over-hyped legend, and the Scarred Man is a myth. Nobody is running from Gray House ghosts."

I appreciated the imagery but needed to correct their view of reality in Bridgeton. I pointed to the bodies around us, "Well, they certainly aren't."

For once, the smile left the tall man's face as he sought a better answer for the situation. He didn't want to believe what I was saying, and I didn't blame him.

I pulled a few small vials from my pack and asked, "Why don't you try one of these and tell me if I'm lying."

The boss looked around at his eight guards. They shrugged in their unease. It was doubtful if any had ever seen, let alone tasted the Black curse before.

"I've got plenty to go around, but the cost is steep. It's said that they have the power to bring legends to life." I offered them nine, leaving the rest in a pack on the horse behind me.

"Quick," Coad pointed to his watcher to collect the vials. He didn't seem to care about the cost, his mouth watering at the chance for regaining supremacy and bringing an end to the troublesome Triad.

The vials were probably priceless in their rarity. They were also amazing in their effect unless they'd been drained of power by a talkative death-demon. *Koki-Ten* vibrated with anticipation and excess dark energy, having siphoned back some of her soul's essence from almost all the remaining vials. She'd left barely enough in each of the ones she'd touched and assured me that her presence in my hand would give me the control that I needed.

As the underboss and his hands drank a dark dose, their eyes brightened at the effect, and they drew their sabers, feeling aggressive and eager to show off. The watcher, Quick, hopped back out of their reach, acting even more like a rabbit now.

I drew *Koki-Ten's* fang and pointed it at Coad as the poorly tainted blood took hold of him and his crew. "You owe a debt for the darkness that you and your men have consumed. It's time to pay it off." I finished that sentence with a nudge on their minds.

Koki-Ten laughed in my head, "*I've got this, Firefanged. Leave your dark side alone.*"

With a new smile on his face, the boss looked at his men and their drawn swords, "Lead the way," he said.

Keller's pull on my energy continued, letting me know that he still lived. I was glad for the horse beneath me, as well as the willingness of *Koki-Ten* to share its newfound reserve as Boss Coad and his crew followed me to the Wicked Worm Inn.

With dawn being only an hour away, the streets around the inn were empty. The dead watchers had been removed, but the scent of fresh blood spoke of the earlier violence and the visit by *Sorrow*. Having assumed that Maidenhall had somehow forgotten about them, the Southport cohort had overreached and fallen under the influence of Hamport. The forced partnership was known as the Coastal Coalition, an ill-fitting name for the one-sided affair.

"Coad, go on in," I ordered. "Show the Southport boss your crew's illicit prowess. Mister Quick will wait outside with me until you return."

Coad nodded and kicked open the front door. His men charged in behind him. Even with their dark motivation, I doubted the nine of them would last long with the weakened brew, but Southport would feel it too and think twice about ever trusting Hamport again.

"Mister Quick, what have you seen tonight?" I wasn't making casual conversation, and my tone cornered the Hamport watcher.

"The destruction of the Coastal partnership and the Bridgeton Triad. Whichever boss survives the night will own the city," he replied.

"And where will you place your bet?"

The man, a slender twitchy fellow in his late twenties, took a moment to look me over. "Is Boss Keller still alive?"

"Barely. Coad knew his business, and the ambush was well-planned."

"How did you survive—," and it struck him, the lack of watchers anywhere around us and the massacre back at the corral colliding in his head. "Maidenhall," he squeaked. "My money is on Maidenhall."

"Mister Quick, remember that bet and don't ever think about hedging."

The inn's front door opened. An invitation, I thought, until the giant staggered out into the street, clutching his side and looking about for help.

"Give me a hand, will you?" I pointed at the dead body tied across

my second horse.

We pulled the dead Hamport assassin off and dragged him inside. The place was a wreck; the brawl had exceeded everyone's expectations, including mine. Here and there, a body twitched, or someone moaned, but scant heartbeats remained witness to the treachery of the failed partnership. Boss Coad had made it to the back corner of the dining room, killing his Southport counterpart and getting a dagger in his neck for the effort.

Back outside, we steered the wounded Southport man onto my extra horse. It was almost time to end the night and the nightmare for the Bridgeton Grays. My dagger was sheathed behind my back as I mounted up, and dawn was coming soon.

"Mister Quick, take the rest of the night off," I said. "But be sure to let everyone know what happened here. I feel that your services will be in great demand in that regard."

I steered my two horses carefully into Westlake territory. Before long, *Sorrow* was scouting the way, padding along a block to my right and guiding us around any trouble. The Westlake cohort was suitably up in arms with the attack on their boss and the Hamport assassins' failed presence. My horse and attire placed me at the scene of the crime, a misleading fact that could be fatal.

Near the western edge of town, on a ridge overlooking the city, we found the stone mansion that Ayla had shown me and a well-guarded gate. Crossbows were the weapon of choice from atop the wall surrounding the place, leaving me little chance to argue. I reached out and stole some of the anxiety from the men around me, offering nothing but calmness back.

"I'm here for Boss Keller," I said, pointing to my right, "And he needs a doctor." The large, wounded man took that moment to moan, following the script perfectly.

"You aren't from Westlake, neither of you," said the guard out front.

"That is correct. My name is Gray. Where's Bridger?"

Keller's man seemed like one tough pro and a good name to mention. It didn't take long for the gate to unlock and the boss's bodyguard to peer outside.

"Who've you got on that horse?" Bridger asked.

"We haven't been formally introduced. Boss Coad followed up his ambush of Westlake with a fateful effort against Southport at the Wicked Worm. There weren't many survivors on either side."

Bridger opened the gate and waved for help to get the wounded man inside. "Let me take you to Keller's second. They've been expecting you."

"How's Keller?" I asked, hoping to see the man before I left.

"Alive but in a poor mood. Caught a blade between his ribs that pierced his lung."

"I've been there," I replied. "The ribs will complain, but the lungs will heal. Keep him flat, and don't let him move around at all."

Bridger had a constant eye for competition and the size of any threat. "Who could touch you? I mean, you saved our necks back there against a few dozen of those rabid Hampport fethers. We lost some of our best blades tonight."

"You've heard of The Gray Wind of Tannoo, haven't you? She wields a pair of wicked daggers made from the fangs of a death-demon."

Bridger didn't know if I was spinning a yarn or not. "How did you survive that?"

Ayla had saved me. She'd reacted when nobody else had realized something was seriously wrong, feeding me her rage at the moment I most needed it. It wasn't the first time she'd come through for me, nor would it be the last.

"Losing a lung isn't the same as losing one's heart," I replied, not having a better answer.

As we entered the manor house, a hand grabbed mine, pulling me to one side, and Ayla leaned her head into my chest.

"It's still beating," she said. "About time you arrived." Ayla looked exhausted, her face an exotic mirror image of my own. She'd done her best to carry the night forward and keep Boss Keller alive.

As I held her, I could feel the strain overcoming her proud spirit. It was time to retrieve her dagger and pack her off to bed. Boss Keller would have to carry on his recovery without us.

"Bridger, where's Keller's second? We need to meet them before we get some rest."

"You're holding her," he shot back. "The last one died at the corral."

"Ayla, you're in charge of Bridgeton?"

"Not while you're in town, but with Boss Keller laid up, I can handle things. Aunt Laila was a good teacher."

Looking at Bridger, I said, "I thought she was going to be sent to Westlake to work for Boss Ganos."

"We all saw your first concern once the ambush was sprung. The boss knows who you value the most and decided to honor that sentiment."

Ayla felt my concern. "Besides, Westlake sounds boring. All the action is happening here, and it's closer to Maidenhall."

I removed Keller's ring from my pack and fitted it onto Ayla's thumb. It was five sizes too big and wouldn't do, but that didn't stop me.

"Now it's official," I said. "I've been trying for ages to marry you off."

Ayla handed back the ugly ring. "Don't you dare think that you're getting rid of me that easily."

Never.

Chapter 9

The Bridgeton Connection

According to Laila, Gray House rules required the stronger, more dominant House to provide collateral in any mismatched alliance. The Fuga were a symbolic bunch, and I had regifted the Na'am family sword to Angus Rhill in Tannoo, creating a tenuous yet sanctioned link. Rhill had wanted the Gray Wind in the bargain and still might meet the legend if he didn't come through with his support for our claim in Hollen. Being far more lethal and persuasive than any Gray House assassin, Raven gave me high hopes in that regard.

In a more personal exchange, Boss Keller had sent his son, Bear, to Westlake, sealing an underworld partnership and bolstering Keller's position as owner of the Westlake interests in Bridgeton. I had pressing Vigil business in Westlake and thought it prudent to meet with Boss Ganos and Bear Keller to better understand the Gray reality rather than its rules. Ayla and her shadow, *Sorrow*, would be staying in Bridgeton, working to solidify Keller's position while the man moaned with a fever from his bed. There was still a chance that Southport, being the closest of the rival cities, would respond in force, but it would take them some time to sort out what had happened and come together on a plan. It was a long shot.

Cal Bridger and a team of three drovers provided an escort for the string of forty riderless mounts. Having bought them, tack and all, the night before, I figured they'd fetch a good price in Westlake, a city known for its horse traders and reclusive Vigil. We arrived the evening of our second day out, having run the backroads up from Bridgeton. We'd avoided the longer way around via the Duke's Highway through

Southport.

Westlake was positioned on the western end of a lake with the same name. To the south and west forested foothills led up into the Brownbacks, a stretch of almost impassable mountains that protected the backside of the Realm. Herds, large or small, weren't allowed inside Westlake's stone walls, so we deposited ours in one of the numerous trader pens on the east side of town. With a blood mark on each saddle, I'd know exactly where they were.

I had two goals for Westlake. The first was to convey the news of the Bridgeton Triad's collapse and the attack on Boss Keller. Bridger was along to guide me, and I had Keller's ring as further proof of my authenticity. My second aim was to connect with Vigil Stone and find out what kept him hidden away in Colivar's southwest corner.

The city had plenty of resources to offer beyond its reputation as a hub of horse breeders and traders. Being only a two-day ride from either Southport or Bridgeton provided considerable commerce. At the same time, the Order of the Vigil stronghold and Royal Horse training grounds offered plenty of ripe opportunities for the Gray world to pick.

Still dusty from the road, Bridger and I entered the White Horse Inn, only a block inside the city's outer walls. There was nothing white about the place, and I thought they should have picked a tan or gray steed instead.

"We'll wait here. Someone will come to us," said Bridger as he started in on his warm ale.

I gave him a look. We'd ventured one whole block into the city, and I couldn't believe that our minimum presence was grounds for concern.

"Mister Gray, Westlake is a careful city. Boss Ganos is known to take offense at any and all uninvited guests. Our escort will arrive shortly, so eat while you can."

I wondered out loud, "Does Ganos treat Boss Keller the same way?"

"Keller knows to stop and wait. It's an ice breaker and a sign of respect."

The food was as gray as the clientele. The kitchen at the White Horse specialized in horse meat, boiled or burnt. Add in a few stale potatoes, and mood-wise, I was all set for the night's coming festivities.

A feminine voice interrupted our delightful feast, "Calvin Bridger, look at what the horse dragged in."

A young couple, the pair almost my age, had strolled up to our table. The woman wore a smirk and the assurance that her boyfriend would remain locked to her side and follow her lead. The young man, detestably handsome with perfect blonde hair and a strong build, seemed more interested in the barmaid as she passed nearby. He did his best to hide his distant fancy from the young woman while she was doing her best to ignore him as she broke the ice with us.

Bridger replied, "Jillian, how's the boss treating you these days?"

"A whole lot better than he's treating Bear, I'll say, not that he doesn't deserve it." The girl took that moment to elbow the young man's eyes back into our half of the room.

"Your dad was always a great judge of character. Too bad his daughter didn't learn." Bridger seemed to enjoy a friendly rapport with the young woman as much as he liked giving the man at her side a hard time.

For his part, the man, obviously Bear Keller, was barely paying attention as if he'd heard the same script a hundred times before. "What brings you up?" he asked.

"News for the boss," said Bridger. "The sooner you take us to him, the sooner you'll find out."

"How's my father?" Break Bear's nose, add twenty years and stick a dagger in his side, and you might have the current boss of Bridgeton.

Bridger kept things short, "Still breathing. Let's go."

As we walked out of the inn, awkward looks, especially from the young woman, began. Bridger hadn't introduced me to the pair, perhaps not knowing what to say, and I figured that was the safest bet. I kept my mouth shut, giving Jillian a polite nod and nothing more.

As a fellow practitioner of distance, Ganos the Gray didn't rise to greet us. He offered me a cold smile and nothing more. The room itself introduced the man, a cocoon of heat, hardwoods, and the stoutest of well-placed guards, many bearing familiar two-headed axes; others wielded sharp-looking glaives and even sharper eyes. Amid it all, the boss's significant presence drew me in and held me in place, like a

trap already shut.

Ganos, being slight of build, watched the room like an owl well-perched for the night. Jillian stood on his left, facing us, with Bear to her left, halfway between interested parties.

The boss's eyes met mine, and his first words were spot on. "Bridger, why do you always bring me trouble?"

He'd poked a hole in my bucket of doubts with his canny perception. Now, more than ever, I was certain that Westlake would be a challenge for the Gray Prince, but I didn't know the extent of it.

"Bringing you Bear wasn't my idea," Cal replied. "If I recall, you asked for him. Something about keeping young Jillian out of trouble?"

"That can't be right, can it?" Ganos chuckled once, then frowned at us for the bad news we'd surely brought. "Tell me what happened."

Only knowing half of the story, Cal Bridger took a half-step back and allowed me to play a short game of show and tell. Reaching into my pack, I retrieved the day's receipt for forty fine steeds plus tack and placed it on the table in front of Ganos. The boss's greed perked up at the equine fortune listed there.

"Those are mine," I said. "Imported from Hamport through Bridgeton of all places."

Ganos passed the slip of paper up to his daughter, who showed it to Bear. Their minds twirled to decipher the news.

"My dad?" Bear asked again.

"Still breathing," I said. "But he's acquired a new second due to that ornery herd."

I nudged Ayla, seeing her camped before a warm fireplace back in Keller's mansion. She looked spent but at ease, listening as if she was here in the room with us.

"And?" Ganos maintained his stoic nature, not giving anything away or trying not to anyway. His perceptiveness revealed plenty with every new item I showed.

Returning the paper horses to my pack, I pulled out a single vial of Black and set it on the table. The small vial alone might be worth the whole herd. To the Gray, it was a key to unleashing power over one's rivals, a short-lived catalyst for turning gold into control of an undercity.

Ganos shifted uncomfortably, but his eyes glinted. "Does your pack

contain thirty-nine more of those?”

“Not quite,” I replied. “I gave several to the underboss of Hamport, leaving Boss Keller in sole control of Bridgeton.”

Bear Keller tried to hide his confusion. Jillian looked at her father and nodded as if confirming the truth in my words. To give away the doses, and to a rival no less, made little sense, but the outcome had justified the trade.

I picked up the vial, one of the fully potent ones, and gave it to Bear Keller. “Keep it. Use it only in a moment of dire need.”

Ganos caught the eyes of his daughter, and I could feel his mind wheeling away in envy and confusion. I’d given away a small fortune to a teenager I’d only just met and didn’t like all that much. He had to wonder why. I certainly did.

“What do you want from me?” he hissed. He didn’t like my little game, a fact that I found ironic as I learned more about the man sitting before me.

Out next, Boss Keller’s ugly ring. “Deal,” Keller had said, a small trade for a larger one.

Showing Ganos the ring, I said, “Boss Keller requests the return of Bear and a suitable contingent to secure Bridgeton until the War of the Gray Prince subsides.”

Ganos the Gray didn’t hesitate. It was owed. “Done,” he said.

I turned to Bear. “Your father was wounded in an ambush by Hamport. He took a blade to his lung and will be a long time recovering. The Triad is gone, destroyed that same night.”

“So, who’s running the town?” said Bear.

“Your father has a new second. They’ll manage things until your father recovers.”

“And Hamport?” said Ganos, clearing his throat.

There was plenty of fear and irritation there, his mind and his voice in sync for once. What sort of trouble had I made? Perhaps I should have taken better heed, but my experience with the Gray Houses had taught me that there was little I could say to change a boss’s mind or, more importantly, their heart. As a Gray prince, my most successful interactions had always been hands-on in nature, and until I earned some standing with Ganos, I’d have little leverage.

Ganos, on the other hand, had all the leverage in town. Where Boss Keller was a seasoned, practical sort, the boss of Westlake seemed to rule by the presence of will alone, his meager words bolstered by an invisible force. The room around us was fully aligned to his cause, whatever that may be. It was a familiar feeling, one that led me to make a bolder play in an attempt to draw the man out.

"Once things are settled here and in Bridgeton, I'll be heading north." I let those words sink in. Hamport was my problem, not his, and it was as good an introduction as any.

"You're not here to make trouble," Ganos replied. It wasn't a question as much as a command by a man that expected it to be followed.

At that moment, I had no intention of making trouble, but like all good things, their very nature can change with the light. I picked up Boss Keller's ring and placed it back in my pack, holding onto Bridgeton.

I could feel Ganos's jealousy, and, in a fit of candor, I offered him the story of my life, "No, but trouble has a way of finding me."

I'd shot the messenger, becoming an even greater threat in Ganos's eyes.

Ganos pouted, "Jillian, please introduce yourself to our guest."

Jillian held out her hand to me, offering a gift that I couldn't ignore. She shivered as I took her hand, and she stepped closer, her clear presence flowing through the connection and her flawless blue eyes. Her heart was pristine, her soul shining bright around it. At once, I felt envious and ashamed of the scars that I smuggled inside me and the inhuman pattern of my existence. Trouble did far more than merely find me.

"You are the Gray Prince," she smiled warmly, her back to her father. Retreating, she gave me a bow, saying, "Forgive the world."

It was a sage request from a talented and well-trained mind, certainly fitting, and one that I'd remember when I left.

"As you say," I nodded.

The boss of Westlake hissed, "What do you want from me?"

He hadn't been surprised by my sudden appearance, and I stared at the man, soaking in his layers of calculation and resolve. Ganos had

his own little corner of the world, one he controlled entirely. It was plenty for him but not enough for the rest of us. Unsurprisingly, Boss Keller had leveraged Ganos's firmly planted position to form a low-key alliance. It was a smart deal, providing Ganos with a protective buffer and Keller with backing. Gaining the support of the man across the table wasn't only a smart move, but for my more committed self, it was a necessity.

I placed my marker for the forty horses and tack back on the table. "Before spring arrives, I want you to fill these with full-blooded sentinels and send them north."

Jillian gasped. Ganos shivered. Bridger and Bear exchanged lost looks.

"Gentlemen, please have a safe trip home," said the boss of Westlake. He waited for Bridger and Bear to leave.

Jillian stood silently at the side of Vigil Stone.

To me, the Gray Houses hovered one step closer to the Black and were an easy roof to thrive under if you had ready access to weapons, money, and the men to use them. Sometimes, the path into the Black was a bit too short, and the Infernal found its way into the exchange of power coveted by all. I'd dealt with those Gray Houses in the most unforgiving of ways, even as I walked similar paths myself. I turned the Black back against itself, while others simply used it to build their own versions of Hell in this world.

"Don't expect me to help you with Hamport," Ganos spat. "You kicked the nest, so you get to feel the sting."

From a distance, I felt Ayla Storm laugh at that remark. We had kicked the nest together and stomped it into oblivion. Now that momentum was moving with us, I considered a more delicate approach but feared that some two-faced boulders might refuse to roll in defense of the Realm.

I didn't need Cat to predict the future and the arrival of the next Infernal Horde. I'd gotten the message and was deathly determined to counter the threat before it could overwhelm us all. Reaching behind my back, I drew *Koki-Ten* and plunged the fang-dagger deep into the polished wooden tabletop between us. "This isn't a gift; it's a message from Niantia, the source of the doses of Black."

The boss's daughter reached out, snatching the dagger from the table, and she sniffed it. "*Kjaira*," she said, confirming my thoughts.

"How would you know?" I asked.

"What else could it be?" She handed the weapon back.

It was long past time for proper introductions.

I sheathed my dagger and pulled out my Vigil's mark, a gold coin with the Order's symbol of an eye within the sun on one side and my Storm Company insignia on the other. I placed it gently on the table before them all, "I am Vigil Ara Storm."

Ganos stood and bowed, as did everyone else in the room. His face seemed a little brighter, and his shoulders stood up straighter. "Vigil Hiram Stone," he replied. "This is my daughter, Inquisitor Jillian Stone. Her mother was my first inquisitor and should have been my last. I will not risk losing another."

The confession of loss was a pivotal remark, the source of intense emotion and the key, I was sure, to unlocking the man before me. Stone's reclusiveness complimented his drive for control through his underworld dealings and left our realm without the broader use of his services. If it were me and I had lost Raven or any of my sisters, I would probably feel the same way, but I wouldn't hide in the back corner of the continent, playing it safe. I'd be on my way to tackle the biggest Horde that I could find and feth whether I came back or not.

We each had our own styles.

I gave him my best bow and most sage advice, "Vigil Stone, it's time to stop hedging your bets."

Telling a stone to move doesn't guarantee that it will roll. Sadly, stones rarely have ears, and if they do, they're often plugged with earth-bound concerns such as mud and sand. In Vigil Stone's case, it was something else entirely.

"Why?" said Ganos the Gray. "Why are you here?"

I could feel the switch. Any threat or hint of threat seemed to drag Vigil Stone clear off the stage, allowing his understudy, Ganos the Gray, to take the lead role. It was startling to see the change in his face as it sidled from concerned Vigil to cold-hearted bastard. In his mind, a completely different pattern emerged.

My reply arrived too late, falling on intractable ears, "Beyond this

small war, there is a plague. The sooner we meet it, the better.”

Chapter 10

Ganos the Gray

Stone, when he was present, was a careful man. “Why do you think I’m planted back here?” he said. “I can see farther than Snow. Much farther.”

Our frustrating talk had lasted well into the night with only his inquisitor present to keep us from tearing out each other’s gray hair. The possibility of an Infernal plague taking hold on the continent was beyond Vigil Stone’s ability to stomach. As Vigil, the threats he faced on the backside of Colivar had been small and relatively infrequent, and yet he hosted a sizable company to deal with them. It was a desperate waste of the Order’s resources.

I still carried the mind-bending visions of the plague that I’d seen while ending a demonic threat beneath Maidenhall. My deepest fear was seeing that vision come to life, and being careful was a luxury that I couldn’t afford.

Stone had lost his wife five years earlier, and the damage from that loss had allowed another persona to run his life. Whenever our staggered conversation became too intense or the otherworldly threat too real, Ganos the Gray arrived behind his eyes to put me in my place.

“What do you see north of the Everest Range?” I asked for the third time.

Ganos had less patience than Stone and was an expert in seeing threats. “Right now, I see grass. Cold fething grass and nothing more.”

That couldn’t be right; I’d seen the tall stone walls of Bastian. If Niantia planned to attack the City-State of Bastian in the spring, they

had to be building their Horde now. Hell-knights had to already be in place, and the Black Wind had to be growing. And that was only half of it.

"Can you see underground?" I spoke in my most gentle manner.

"Can you?" Stone countered, his tone softening as well.

"No, but I can feel the angry growl of a Hell-cave when I'm close."

"So can Jill, but you're both better than me in that regard."

"If you can perceive things that far north, can't you also look to the east?"

"Like the Dungarr? Of course. Quiet there these days, isn't it?"

Ganos hovered right below the surface.

Jillian gave her father a stern look. They'd read the reports of my demise. Perhaps we hadn't completed introductions after all.

"Jillian, how old are you?" I said.

"Almost eighteen."

That seemed like a stretch to me. "How much is almost?"

She smiled, "I'll turn seventeen this summer."

It was a pretty smile, and even more so on an unfamiliar face.

"You're barely older than my sister, Ayla."

Vigil Stone seemed ready to dare me to question his choice for an inquisitor. The Order of the Vigil had a strict set of guidelines concerning age. Men had to be eighteen to graduate to sentinel, and women didn't officially come of age until twenty. I figured the Order's requirements had to do with protecting the women from the men that had barely turned eighteen.

"Ayla Storm, my younger sister, is Boss Keller's second," I continued. "She's running Bridgeton in the middle of a Gray war while the boss recuperates. When Bear Keller arrives, she'll still be running the show."

Jillian relaxed, but the mention of Bridgeton and the Gray war brought the boss back to the surface.

Ganos had one more rock to throw my way. "Ara, how old are you?"

"Almost twenty," I smiled at his daughter. "This summer."

"Why the gray hair?" he said, not liking where I'd placed my attention or maybe the fact that I was half his age.

"A *Kjaira* took an interest in me. An alpha, no less."

We had plenty in common when it came to facing assassins, but we'd have to become far better friends before I discussed the color of my hair in any detail.

"And your ring. Why does it flicker like that?"

"Another *Kjaira*. The soul of an enforcer lives within it."

"An enforcer?" Jillian asked.

"Not all *Kjaira* have the same strengths and roles within a brood. Some are pure dark power made to destroy in a flash, while others are more devious in their approach, yet all are equally deadly."

"How many *Kjaira* have you met?" said Ganos. He was measuring the threat before him and already realizing his mistake.

Kjaira were death-demon assassins. To have survived one placed me in a new category in his mind.

"Four, no, five." *How could I forget my wife?*

"How many have you killed? And don't tell me five. Your soul is darker and colder than the grassy plains of Niantia."

I felt embarrassed by his remark, accurate as it may be. I'd only met the man and his daughter, and Ganos was scouring my being for every scrap and clue he could find.

I tried to steer them away from the monster in the room. "Only one of the five that I've met has actually ceased to exist, but none remain incarnate within our world. Niantia has a particularly devious alpha *Kjaira* named *Koki-Ten*, though they only have partial control of its soul."

"And the other four souls?"

It was an accusation, plain and simple, and I could sense the boss's mind reel as he considered his next move. My lethal presence was a threat and a roadblock to gaining any sort of standing with the man. A Gray deal was out of the question as I had nothing to offer the man but trouble.

Jillian placed her hand on her father's arm, completing the introductions and, in a way, sealing everyone's fate. "They're here, father, in this room. They're listening to you right now."

I was impressed, as was Ganos. That was some Hart-level perception, and Jillian offered me one more gift, something for my twentieth birthday.

“Ara, when you go north to meet the Nantine threat,” she said. “Don’t go as Vigil Storm. For once, go as yourself, whatever that may be. Only then will you return.”

She had done what Vigil Stone could not. She’d acknowledged my growing concern about Niantia, not sensing it beyond the Everest Mountains but finding the fetid truth buried deep within my heart.

Boss Ganos absorbed the meaning of Jillian’s words and would have none of it, his calm smile showing me the bad bet that he’d just placed.

The following morning found us riding among the Vigil’s training fields. Cal Bridger and Bear Keller had left at dawn with another two dozen hands from Boss Ganos. Several of the more lethal-looking enforcers had been carrying heavy axes and were Vigil-trained, I was sure. Bridgeton would be fully secured.

“Almost all of the sentinels here are full-blooded,” said Stone. “A few years ago, we located an altar buried a short distance into the Brownbacks, and we use it for training purposes. We rotate platoons to guard the entrance to the cave, and often enough, something rears its ugly head for us to chop off. I figured if they’re going to toy with us, we might as well make use of them too.”

After a brief night’s sleep, Vigil Stone seemed to be more present and less agitated, but his calculating tone and venom-filled mind told me that Ganos the Gray was holding the reins to his horse while I was on hand.

I wanted nothing from Ganos and everything from Stone. Vigil Stone’s horse troopers and far-seeing support would be invaluable for the coming campaign, but I’d yet to discover how to breach the wall that divided his mind into two.

A Hell-cave was certainly common ground. “Vigil Stone, that sounds like something that I might do. Do you have paladins to back up the sentinels in case the demons get a clue and rush the entrance?”

“Plenty. The cave entrance is narrow, steep, and easily defended. How about we go take a look? As a fellow Vigil, I’d like to get your opinion on the site.”

It had been a year since I’d last fought through an underground lair

and destroyed an altar. Perhaps, it would be a hole through which I could climb to reach Vigil Stone.

“Vigil Stone, are you a betting man?”

Ganos replied, “That depends on what’s on the table. What are you risking, and what do you expect in return?”

“Everything,” I said. “But I’ll settle for a horse company of forty sentinels, paladins, and scouts.”

Ganos raged beneath the surface at my modest request. “Is that all?”

I was asking for a tenth of what Vigil Stone could field. It shouldn’t have been an issue, but to Ganos the Gray, it was a sign of weakness and a means to an end. The end of me.

The cavern glowed in a sickly, red blend of extreme heat, sulfur, and decay, spoiling the cold, clear mountain air above it. The opening was narrow and tilted upward at a severe angle. Visitors would slip and slide down fifty feet of treacherous rock before the track leveled out, and climbing back out would be a real chore without a rope.

Raven’s face appeared before me. She’d been with me the last time I’d taken a hellish plunge into one of these, and I’d survived it because of her. I hoped that we’d survive our time apart as we struggled with the demands of distance. Perhaps that’s what led me to the edge of this Hell-filled abyss; its pain and destruction would be a much-needed distraction.

Three of Stone’s stout Paladins, including Paladin-Captain Krait Bujold, stood around the opening, unsure of our intentions. I’d expected a platoon of sentinels to guard the entrance, but we were alone among the Brownbacks, so named for the range’s lack of snowy peaks. If Inquisitor Loeb had been here, he would have demanded more paladins and immediately ordered the site’s destruction no matter the cost in sentinel flesh. Loeb was a sensible man.

“Vigil Stone, what was the last demon to emerge?” I said.

This was his hellhole. He should know.

“An ant-demon. Ugly and slow.”

That answer made little sense to me. The demons had to know that the entrance was being guarded. An ant-demon would have fared far

better by defending the tunnel below or digging a new path of escape. On the other hand, a spider-demon would have had the sneaky speed to take a sentinel by surprise and could attack multiple targets at once. The potential terror would have eroded the morale of any sentinels assigned to a midnight watch. Fortunately, nothing stirred in the tunnel below us.

“Vigil Stone, are you sure?”

Ganos, for his part, was tiring, as if it were a real effort to hold his dominant position in the day’s long conversation, but he had already sorted his solution to the Gray Prince. “Captain Bujold, please show him.”

A right cross caught me under the chin and lifted me clean off the ground—*fething paladins*.

I bounced off the lip of the tunnel as I fell, unable to physically control my body, and tumbled downward. Without an ant-demon’s ability to hook into solid rock, my body slid and rolled, my leather armor absorbing most of the punishment before I scraped to a stop a hundred feet in. The tunnel floor around me was covered in human bones and black sludge, the scattered remains of sentinels and demons. It was a busy cave, after all, and I wasn’t the first person to be dumped in without ceremony. Stiff and sore, I crawled back up the slope until I was beneath the opening, but instead of sunlight, only a few stars pricked the night sky, twinkling in time to my throbbing jaw—*fething paladins. Can’t kill ‘em, can’t take ‘em with you.*

Turning in a crouch, I unsheathed my broadsword, *Exile*, and my fang-dagger, *Koki-Ten*. My mind brushed against *Madd-Jak*, “*Sneak*” escaped my lips.

Kjaira can move unseen by lesser foes, and I planned to leverage my enforcer’s ability as I scurried downward through the growing tunnel and its red-tinged darkness.

Ten minutes later, my head had cleared, and dozens of eyes blinked from the ceiling fifty feet ahead. Beyond those, an irregular-shaped opening connected the tunnel to a cavern or maybe a furnace where nothing stirred but plenty slumbered in demonic bliss.

Racing forward, I bisected two hairy bushels of eyes and leaped back from the opening to avoid the venom-dripping fangs of the spider-

demons as they fell and writhed on the tunnel floor. *Exile* split them into ever smaller pieces until they began to melt. Being a member of the human race, I hated dark spiders and took a moment to recapture control of my breathing.

I scanned ahead.

Like any good hellhole, there were plenty of dual-natured demons: four in a hellish mix of man and wolf and eight more, brawny lizard-kings, waiting in the next room. Agile claws and teeth paired well with the lizard-men's stocky strength and spiked tails while the intense heat of the room, with walls ready to cook human flesh, added to the challenge.

Why was I doing this again?

"Are you asking me?" Koki-Ten whispered in my mind. *"The reasons seem clear."*

"And those are?" I thought.

"You suffer from a curse, Firefanged, and the distance you've kept from your brood leaves you vulnerable. Why do you have a family if you don't allow them to protect you?"

"At the moment, my weapons are my family, as sad as that sounds."

"I have heard those same words before, spoken by the Damogir of Niantia. You are truly one of his Get."

The Damogir and his *Get* were my foes, but the alpha's remark had the power of truth behind it.

"I cannot lie to you, Firefanged. You carry the marks of many claims, if not my own."

It seemed to always come back to that, the claims on my heart and soul, each having a different deed of ownership and ability to direct my path. *Koki-Ten*, on the other hand, had none, allowing it into my inner circle of one.

I caressed the familiar fang. *"I'm here, standing before a doorway to the Infernal Domain. What should I do?"*

"Only you can choose your path and the plagues that you will face. I share in your curse but can only follow my Infernal Contract to its end, locked within the weapons of the Get."

The *Get*'s weapons were the relics of the death-demon's body, its claws and fangs imbued with shards of its exiled soul. *Koki-Ten* was a

reminder of everything that I hated and feared about my own existence and a lesson my heart was yet to learn.

Koki-Ten laughed at my unguarded thoughts. *"The greatest of ironies in Hell is that Firefanged is a curse, anathema for all that exists in the Infernal Realm."*

"Why?" I whispered.

"You have a heart. It marks us as opposites and enemies and snares all that cross the Veil into your world. It is no accident that the Infernal plague begins in the hearts of your kind before spreading anywhere else. Destroying the heart unlocks the doors of Hell, and without it, you are completely defenseless to demons great and small."

More than a few moments passed as I considered the demon's words. They rang true among everything I'd experienced so far. *Kjaira* were fixated on the hearts of men. They needed to destroy, protect, or own those that they couldn't resist. *Koki-Ten*, locked in its contract, had chosen to own mine, and we'd both lost because of it.

I was a human being with the power to choose my own path, not a weapon with a soul. My life wasn't guided by an Infernal Warlord's Black House but by a heart, scalded and scathed, yet mine. It was the truest mark of any Gray prince, whether they lived in a castle or a gutter.

Lost in a maze of twisted thoughts, I stumbled upon the truth, *"Koki-Ten, you've seen the plague?"*

"I live within it. It has been thriving for years in Niantia."

The silence of the cave belied the slumber of Infernal beasts a finite distance away. What sort of scream would it take to wake them up and send them home?

Koki-Ten echoed once more in my head, *"Any path you select will be a boon and a black joy, knowing that I am the one to protect you. It is a false freedom, yet one that I will relish."*

Ayla's smiling face flashed in my head. She'd been right about me all along. My need to protect and own those around me was real and innate, and I owed her my life as I did with only a few others. The fang-blade faded to silence in my hand, allowing me a moment to change my mind. I sheathed my weapons and leaned against the over-warm wall.

I reached out to Ayla and then to Laila and Cress. Juggling both a small trade and a larger one in my mind, I sorted through our common pain, sadness, and resolve. I shared my new path, reaching through the brood bonds to connect with the three women, asking forgiveness from each as I offered them a new purpose, one that I believed they'd perceive as right from a distance.

In my head, I screamed "*Play!*" as I took my first steps into the fiery cavern. The devil-wolves rose and fell first as *Exile* cleaved with a berserker's rage while *Koki-Ten* bit into the corruption of the dark souls that overran us.

Tucked into an alcove at the back of the room sat an altar protected by three Hell-knights, each standing statue still. I veered right, sensing the heat of the nearest wall, and slashed across the tail of the first lizard-demon to react. The beast spun away in an off-balance maneuver as I circled the room in a frenzy. There were eight muscular lizard-kings, each working to corner me as I ran through the sulfurous smoke. To my advantage, the cavern was round in shape, roundish anyway, and lacking in corners. *Exile* lashed out, slicing the demons apart as I dodged their claws and tails with newfound ease. Only a single strike found the armor of my back, the spike of a tail half-severed slipping past my guard and guile.

The *Kjaira* souls held within my grasp laughed as they battled the slower creatures, and their appetites grew in anticipation of the Hell-knights. I had to rein them in before approaching the Infernal altar, pushing *Madd-Jak* back into his black diamond ring. While the death-demons were enjoying the fight, I was reshaping the pain that caressed my left shoulder blade, intent on having a conversation.

"Who do you serve?" I'd sheathed my fang-dagger but still held *Exile* at the ready.

"Pestilence," came the reply from the second of the three dark knights. His answer wasn't a surprise. I'd met his brethren before.

"Am I recognized?"

"You are, *Firefanged*. You wear the curse well."

"Then, kneel," I commanded. "And show me your swords."

All three obeyed. A small trade for a bigger one and the harsh

clatter of swords echoed through the cavern as the weapons fell with their knights onto the rough stone floor. Lacking a heart of their own, the Hell-knights' souls had adopted their weapons as their eternal homes and took solace from the familiar, if not the Divine.

Chapter 11

The Courtship of Vigil Stone

“The altar was man-made.” I handed Inquisitor Jillian Stone the shard of an ancient and newly shattered vase, pulling her back toward our only way out. “And what the feth are you doing down here alone?”

“I’m not alone,” she replied, taking my hand. “But I could ask the same of you.”

The cave, having lost its reason for being, was beginning to crack and come apart. Over my right shoulder, I’d slung a brace of three heavy black swords, the blades chattering in complaint as we jogged back up the ramp to the single difficult exit.

“Feth, I hope there’s a rope,” became my mantra for the next few minutes. Luckily, someone had dropped one with several knots at the steep entrance, and I did my best to follow Jillian’s motivating form upward into the clear.

With twenty feet still to go, someone at the top had the good sense to yell, “Pull him up!” and from there, it was a quick and bumpy ride out.

It was well past midnight. The campfires blazing all around us cast plenty of shadows for a few dozen sentinels keeping watch on the rocky mountainside. There weren’t any Vigils or Paladins to be seen, but I kept my distance from the other men. I wasn’t ready for another sucker punch and felt sure that I would kill the first trooper to come near me. The raging headache and familiar feeling of blood running down my back had left me in a suitably disagreeable mood.

No one had dared to climb down the hole except the young inquisitor. It had been the right call after all, but I wouldn’t admit it.

I dropped the hellswords on the ground. Both of my shoulders ached. “Jill, what are you doing here? And who let you jump into that pit?”

The inquisitor smirked, “Only my friends call me that.”

“Should I take it back?”

“Can you?” she said.

“No, but you still haven’t answered my question.”

I was blocked by the woman. My back lingered above the hellhole while the rest of the camp kept their distance.

“No, I haven’t, but just wait.” Jillian Stone slowly turned me around and carefully tugged a rigid, black spike from my upper back. “Made it clean through your armor.”

“Nothing clean about that. It’s from a demon’s tail,” I tried not to shrug or wince. “They’re cagey bastards.”

A wet sheen covered the last inch of the seven-inch spike. My blood kept it from disintegrating with the rest of the lesser demon, providing yet another souvenir from my trip.

“Keep it,” I said. “But tell me why you’re here.”

“My father and the Paladins returned this afternoon without you. He said you’d decided to go into the Hell-cave on your own and hadn’t come out.”

“That’s not the whole story. Your father isn’t himself lately.”

“Not since you arrived, that’s for sure.”

“You noticed?”

“There were two Hell-spiders, eight lizard-kings, four half-wolves, and three Hell-knights.” As an inquisitor, Jillian had taken note of everything she’d seen in the near dark environment, and I could feel her curiosity over the newly acquired swords.

“Who taught you to call them ‘lizard-kings?’ I thought that only I used that term.”

“I’ve read all your reports,” she said. “Can’t help it if that’s what they look like, even dismembered as they were.”

I hadn’t even read my reports, but I was glad that my consul and second had been keeping the Order informed.

“But how could you even see where you were going?” I said.

“You give off enough light for those of us gifted to see it, and the

cave had lost its Infernal presence, so I figured it was safe. You'd been gone for hours and might have been hurt."

She was right on all counts, but my frown only deepened.

"You think I haven't seen things?" Jillian scoffed.

"If you had, you wouldn't have dared to follow me."

"Why?"

I bent and picked up one of the long, black swords. "Ever seen one of these?"

"No."

"Any guess as to why I have three?"

This would have been a great time for Early Vale to do his thing if only I'd brought him along. At Inquisitor Stone's request, Warden Cross had assembled the entire troop of Vigil Company Stone on the Order's training fields outside of Westlake's sturdy walls. Horses had been left in their pens, and the Vigil's men were organized by sections. Starting with the Paladins, I'd take as many as I could get. I was done negotiating with Boss Ganos for the Order resources needed for the spring campaign. *Why haggle with one flawed Vigil when you can simply face down hundreds of his eager and loyal troops?*

Stone's medic had fitted a sling on my left arm to slow me down while I tried to ignore the puncture wound that had tapped my shoulder blade like a keg. A tight set of stitches were enough to halt the leak and ruin another short night's sleep. All in all, I was in the perfect mood for this morning's assembly.

"For the many that I haven't met, I'm Vigil Ara Storm. I'm here to recruit for a northern campaign, one that will extend beyond the bounds of the Realm of Colivar and onto the Plains of Niantia."

It's not that I didn't trust Warden Cross or Vigil Stone or their opinions regarding the quality of their sentinels. I merely had a different way of measuring. Unwrapping a long leather satchel, I removed three hellswords and stabbed each into the ground out in the center of the field. It was the best I could do with one arm, but it was enough to garner everyone's attention.

The Paladins were the Order's elite brotherhood. Brawny and experienced, they wore the heaviest armor with ease and carried the

burden of engaging the Horde's generals during a battle. They were powerful shock troops and warriors without equal, toting the egos to match, but they were a deck full of Jacks compared to my pair of Kings.

"Company Storm has two Paladins in its service. Cynan Black and Walker Grey need more men of the Brotherhood to hold the line this spring. Has anyone here killed three Hell-knights?"

I knew the answer to that by scanning the souls of the two-dozen Paladins assembled before me. None had, though a few of the older ones had taken two in their careers, and every Paladin present had destroyed at least one, granting them membership into the elite Brotherhood. My question was simply there to level the field in a vain attempt to give me standing among the proud. I'd killed three at once, multiple times.

"Your company boasts three paladins if those swords are truly yours," Warden Cross called out from halfway across the field. His Paladins were hesitant to engage, and I could feel his embarrassment at their lack of respect.

Jillian Stone stood between the Warden and her father, each keeping their distance from the foul-tempered, young Vigil.

"Inquisitor Stone, have I killed three Hell-knights?"

"No," she stated loud enough for the entire field to hear, taking the weight of disbelief onto her shoulders. "You've killed a dozen by my count."

I placed my hand on the hilt of *Jin'rahl*, a name that translated to 'Eater of Fire.' No, I didn't know any Infernal recipes, but the alpha demon's soul burned on within the black sword, calling out its challenge to the battle-knights arrayed before us. None of the Paladins seemed to hear it.

"Are any of the Brotherhood willing to join me for the honor of wielding this hellsword against the Infernal?"

Many were eager to step forward, yet all were being held back, as if under strict orders to resist any offer. Hoping for at least ten, I'd be lucky to get one out of this morning's charade.

I could feel the smirk on Vigil Stone's face as he watched beside his daughter. Jillian seemed puzzled by the lack of commitment being

shown by Company Stone, but this was my fight, not hers. I was standing in her father's court and needed to better introduce myself to his followers. Hallowed names and rare deeds weren't cutting it.

Paladin-Captain Bujold stood front and center among his peers, an older warrior maybe twice my age, proud of his position and clear in his resolve to keep things as they were. His eyes glinted like ice, and the bruise on my jaw matched the one on his knuckles perfectly. My attempt to recruit his brethren had only raised his disdain, and it was time to square things with the captain.

"Captain Bujold, please step forward," I said.

The man looked first to Vigil Stone before doing so. It was his second and last mistake as he stoked my anger into a bright red ball of rage. There was a major threat lurking out of our reach on the northern horizon, and Vigil Stone had ceded his duty to a fething gray boss. I pointed out a clear spot on the field for the captain and began stripping off my weapons and armor. A sentinel left the ranks on my right, coming over to help me. Benji Lucas, a long-armed former recruit from Berykholt, gave me a friendly nod. I hadn't seen him in almost two years. He knew what I was about to do, or so he thought.

"How's Hicks?" he asked. "Keeping his head, I hope."

"He has. Gunner too. Thanks for the help here."

I'd been brash, coming into Westlake without my bodyguards or anyone to act as my second. By the time my last vambrace hit the ground, I was bare-chested, and my Vigil scars were burning across my breast and back. I carried my second hidden within me, and it was an endless source of fury and pain. I held the bloody spike of a lizard-king in my right hand and nothing more. It was a gift on loan from a friend for this morning's session. They'd somehow known that I'd need it.

"Are you ready, Paladin-Captain?" I said.

Vigil Stone had lost his smile, he and his daughter both, and Captain Bujold looked suitably confused.

Feth him. Feth them all.

"For what?" said the captain. His anxiety was starting to show as he stared at the naked truth of his final moments.

Ganos had used him, and now, so would I. *A small trade for a larger*

one.

“Ready your axe,” I spat. “This morning’s lesson is about to begin.”

Bujold complied, leaving his shield strapped across his back. It wouldn’t have saved him, but it might save the rest.

Punching a blast of fear and confusion into the mind of the overbearing Paladin, I bolted forward, and before he could react, I’d maneuvered within his guard. The man outweighed me by a good sixty pounds. With his plate armor, the difference was more than a hundred. I bounced off his chest, spinning and ducking his response. I quickly backed away. I may have growled, and yesterday’s uncorked wound may have started leaking, but Bujold would perceive none of that as he whirled with his heavy axe and toppled into an immovable heap with blood gushing from his temple and neck.

Taking advantage of the shock that spread across the field, I counted under my breath and pulled back hard on the reins of the Mad Black horse that I was riding. My feet were moving of their own accord across the turf toward the assembled officers.

“Warden Cross, Vigils of the Order aren’t Paladins for a reason. We aren’t allowed to lose our resolve or hide among the lines of our peers.” Those may have been my last coherent words of the day as the Black horse bucked.

“Who’s next?” I said. “How about you, Stone? You chicken-fether! You cower, unable to deliver that which you owe to the realm. You hide behind your Gray mask instead of using it to the Order’s advantage, and you risk us all.”

I stampeded fear and despair at the man, trampling him and his minions in my fury and finally cracking his walls. Seeing him shaken, I lashed out, not with my spike, but with a more dire weapon. I unleashed the Pestilent plague vision that had been encased for far too long in my torpid skull. Vigil Hiram Stone had no choice, no warning, and no defense.

Stone and everyone around him collapsed onto the field, falling away, screaming and scratching at their eyes. In an instant, having lost his stone-willed defenses, Ganos the Gray shattered like an ancient ceramic vase. He thrashed, his jaw grinding and his teeth biting into his tongue while his daughter tucked herself into a feeble ball, rocking

and shrieking with rivulets of blood running from her eyes and nose. Warden Cross convulsed, quickly spiraling into unconsciousness along with the company's sentinel-captain and their nearby sergeants.

"Hold!" I screamed at the assembled ranks before they could react, unbridled fury shooting forth in my voice. "We aren't finished. We haven't even begun."

Not a man moved.

Grabbing the hands of Warden Cross and his officers, I pulled them onto their sides. The fire in their minds was doused by my touch, even as vomit spilled from their mouths and noses. Placing a hand on Jillian's forehead, she eased, whimpering yet breathing, until she found herself looking up into my eyes. A five-count later, having dampened the curse, I pulled back and let her work out the meaning of it all. I'd warned her back at the cave.

Vigil Stone was a different matter, screaming his dead wife's name with every breath and clawing evermore feebly at his face and the turf around him. It was his turn to pay for the weak, wicked game, playing hide and seek with Colivar's survival and placing his Gray persona above all. Holding myself back, I watched Ganos the Gray burn to ash. He'd sought to force a Gray prince to heel and instead landed himself in the Pestilent grip of a Prince of Hell.

In that plaintive moment, Cat grabbed my hand and tugged me forward. Tears of blood painted lines on her careworn face.

"Bring him back," she said. "Please pull him back."

"Cat, the threat is real," I replied.

"Of course, it's real. The vision you carry is of the present, not the future. Niantia is in ruin, a realm convulsing like Vigil Stone. You must confront the Damogir in the Old City and bring an end to the Infernal plague."

As she said the word 'plague,' it became real in my mind. The vision spun down into a distant beacon. It was there, waiting for me, beckoning.

"Will you forgive me?" I asked.

Cat offered a promise, holding it just out of reach, a carrot for a starving gray horse, "When you return. Only then."

"Tell Cynan that help is on the way." I released her hand, taking

back the reins.

Vigil Stone's mind was cracking, even as I knelt. My hand grasped his throat and squeezed, halting his rant and yanking his attention back to the surface. It was a privilege for him to breathe, and I wanted to share that fact with his subconscious before he fully woke. On a count of three, I let go and slapped him full across the face, waiting for his bloodshot eyes to focus. Finding a gray devil peering through the window to his soul, Stone flinched and froze like a rabbit caught in a dead drop.

"Vigil Stone, welcome to my world. I'm so glad that we've finally met."

The far-seeing rock of Westlake could only drool and nod. It was enough for now. The Stone Company medics arrived to take charge of the mess. Benji Lucas had the good fortune of standing behind me when I'd unleashed the Infernal vision.

"Sentinel Lucas, pick thirty of the hardest sentinels and make sure at least one of them is a sergeant that I can trust. I'll select the Paladins and Scouts. We're all leaving in the morning."

Shirtless, smelling like bacon, I stood again in front of the Brotherhood. Smoke wafted upward from my right breast, and blood seeped down my back, rolling over the moguls of scar tissue. Glancing over my shoulder at the late Captain Bujold, he didn't look like he was enjoying his unobstructed view of the blood-filled turf. *Feth him. He'd dropped me in a Hell-cave for Stone and had become a danger to the survival of our realm.*

This time, I ignored the long, black swords waiting patiently in the field. "I'm Vigil Ara Storm. Who will join me?"

Bar Sinister

Burning Answers

"It was never a gift," said Memeton. He deftly caught the last drops of a Bloody Nail on the back of his tongue. It sizzled down his throat, smelling of sulfur and congealed blood.

We'd been going in circles, trying to sort the reason for my unending confinement as my other soul maneuvered beyond the Veil. I keenly wanted to rejoin the Infernal Cycle and use the power already harvested by my other half in the Outer Domain.

"On that, we can agree. Who makes this Burning Bush liquor anyway?" My mind wasn't up to attacking the problem of the moment, having fogged completely over with the bartender's latest concoction.

To my right, *Rei-Seeck* purred. She was my death-demon companion and a one-way ticket out if I ever got bored enough with the place. For now, she was sipping her cocktail in a most arousing manner.

"When you finish yours, you can try some of mine," I offered.

"I wasn't a gift either," she replied. "Not for you anyway."

Ouch. "Where did I go wrong?" I chuckled.

She leaned forward and looked down the bar, catching Memet's eye. She didn't say a word.

"Another round!" Memet pounded eagerly on the bar counter, avoiding its teeth in the process.

I could hardly wait, but I tried. "Well, Memet? Where did the House of Hal-Raekorn err?"

"You didn't," he replied. "And the High Prince noticed."

"Noticed what? That we were winning?"

“Yes. The Cycle was turning too fast in your favor, and even with my help, that had never happened before. The pendulum had swung too far toward War, and it wasn’t swinging back.”

“But beyond Pestilence and Strife, there is always War, and if that doesn’t work, there is Death.” It was the simple stack of our reality, the foundation of the Infernal Cycle.

Memet smiled. “Death is here with us, unable to collect, but where is Pestilence? And don’t tell me they’ve decided not to play. As a low prince, Kasaval must.”

Rei coughed, slapping her hand flat on the bar counter. Yet another distraction from the most lethal of beauties.

I was on to her game now and ignored her for once. My Black blood had chilled, even as it bubbled and slurred within me.

I spat, “The Outer Domain.”

“Exactly,” said Memet. “But how? A major power would never be allowed to cross the Veil, and if one somehow managed it, I don’t see how the High Prince could ever force them back into the Infernal Domain.”

The Master of Reality was barred by its own rules concerning the Infernal Cycle, but there was one remedy, and the realization ruined my night.

“*Firefanged*,” I said, and a bucket of Bloody Nails couldn’t burn more.

Chapter 12

Storm Company

I entered Bridgeton, still lacking a second. Having conscripted twelve Paladins, thirty-two sentinels, seven elite Scouts, and one overly perceptive, underage inquisitor, I was escorted by a company of more than fifty of the Order's best. I'd taken half of Stone's Paladins and could have taken all of his Scouts but believed that Vigil Stone would need the rest soon enough. The Scouts were led by Sergeant Keegan, leaving his second in command for Vigil Stone. Sentinel-sergeant Shore ruled the section of sentinels, which included Benji Lucas as the youngest of the bunch.

I took the two meanest Paladins, Acker Lorde and Seely Lankes, as my bodyguards, while Inquisitor Stone got a more civilized pair to watch her back. Lorde and Lankes had been splitting time working for Ganos the Gray and had been there when Captain Bujold cold-cocked me in the Brownbacks. Their meanness was a marker, one I could follow with ease. I would immediately know if they were considering a bad choice. We had a short, earnest conversation covering their life expectancy, loyalty, and belief in our shared mission.

As vaunted Paladins, they'd each taken down a Hell-knight, and Acker Lorde sported a wicked scar across his stomach from a demon-filled melee years before. He was a tough bastard to have survived the wound, and I told him so. It was common ground. Seely Lankes was a thinker, but I didn't hold it against him. His axe was as heavy as the next guy's, and he waved it like a double-bladed feather.

Vigil Stone had loaned me his inquisitor in a gesture of goodwill and a bid for privacy as he worked to overcome his shame, gather his wits,

and resume his career as the Vigil of Westlake. I gave him the remainder of spring to sort his mental state and move northeast. Reuniting with Jillian would act as a strong incentive for the man. She'd be there for him if and when he took to the field.

As Vigil Storm, it was my first time in Bridgeton. As such, I found our column guided to the Lord-Mayor's manor with a troop of the city guard leading the way. We'd ridden in from the west, taking the Southport highway, and had passed within a mile of Keller's estate. My sister, *Sorrow*, was already shadowing our advance, and interested watchers lit up my senses as we crossed the city and the main bridge to the northside of town.

Our arrival at the Lord-Mayor's estate was met by an open gate and plenty of hands to manage our horses. We'd sent the rest of the company ahead to find lodging, only keeping our Paladin bodyguards and Keegan's screen of elite Scouts. Keegan circled the block with his men, leaving only a few in the mayor's courtyard for good luck. Sitting on top of the stable's roof, *Sorrow* kept watch too, and I couldn't pass up the teaching moment while we waited for the lord-mayor to greet us. He was unexpectedly delayed.

I drew my dagger, the seven-inch fang immediately grabbing my bodyguards' attention. "Paladins, please point out the nearest threat."

Jillian Stone began to glance about the courtyard, and her pair of Paladins did the same. They were used to feeling and seeing demons well before violent contact occurred.

"The key, gentlemen, is to follow the eyes of your inquisitor."

Jillian Stone had frozen in place, and I felt the hissing laugh of *Sorrow* across the courtyard. The young woman didn't say a word as the black shadow became a blur in the afternoon and disappeared over the wall. Our guards caught the briefest glimpse, and that was enough to break them of their over-confidence, letting them know things would be different from now on.

"Welcome to my world," I said, quietly taking Jillian Stone's hand.

"How did you do that?" she said.

"Do what?"

"Stop me from peeing myself."

"It's what I do. Lankes, Lorde, you need any help?" I held out my

other hand.

"That couldn't be what I think it was, could it?" said Lankes.

"It was," said Inquisitor Stone. She watched me sheath my dagger. "That's your brood sister?"

I gave her the slightest of nods. "Here comes the mayor now."

A short fellow, well-fed and somewhat twitchy, approached with a genuine smile and Ayla Storm on his arm. "Vigil Storm, I am Lord-Mayor Malcolm Sams. Welcome to Bridgeton. We've not had the pleasure of a Vigil's presence in many years."

It was almost an accusation. My bodyguards had stepped back, leaving the introductions to Jillian and me.

"Lord-Mayor, the acting Inquisitor of Company Storm, Jillian Stone."

"Young lady, I've missed seeing your father." That was an accusation, but she handled it well.

"My father has been ill of late, Lord-Mayor, but he will be coming through before you know it, and when he does, beware. He hasn't been himself."

The sage words reached the Mayor's ears, and he nodded as if the Divine had spoken, forgetting where he was for a moment. The strong effect of her voice on the man shocked me, and I released Jillian's hand. She could pull on others with her tone. Ganos the Gray would never have let her go had he still been around.

"Lord-Mayor, who is this lovely lady you have on your arm? Someone important? Your wife, perhaps?" I'd been gone less than a week and was astounded by the change.

Ayla was wearing one of Laila's favorite styles, a sleeveless dress topped with a reinforced leather jacket and comfortable boots that added to her height. Someone had fixed up her hair and face, adding a few years to her appearance. She looked radiant and in charge. No man or Mayor would tell her 'No,' and in my mind, her power now rivaled that of Jillian Stone. *Perhaps it always had.*

"Lord Storm, this young lady is the niece of one of our city's finest families. Miss Keller is managing her uncle's estate and kindly stopped by to thank me for the added security we've been providing around the docks and on the northside of the river."

I smiled. "If you ask me, I'd say she looks like trouble. Where are

her bodyguards? Bridgeton has a dangerous reputation.”

It was an accusation aimed at Ayla, not the Mayor. She should be more careful.

“Nonsense,” said Ayla. “The city is perfectly quiet, and my sister is never far.”

“With your beauty and poise, your sister must be a dreadful demon to keep the locals at bay.”

A blush broke out upon her face. “You, sir, are a cad, but you remind me of my brother, and I’d be glad for you to escort me home.”

“I’ll be happy to do so. Mayor Sams, your city is a fine example of lordly oversight. Unfortunately, having more pressing concerns to the north, I won’t be staying long, but I sincerely appreciate the protection that you provide to your fair citizens.”

It was the most arduous of good-byes, one I’d thought to avoid in Bridgeton, not knowing how to make it right. Ayla knew better.

We left the Scouts and Inquisitor Stone at the north end of the Basin Bridge, telling them that I’d find them by morning. Most of the company rode my newly acquired mounts, each with a specially marked saddle. Only the Paladins had brought their own horses, each extra-large animal carrying its own layer of leather and chain armor.

“How’s your uncle?” I said, not knowing a better place to start.

My new bodyguards rode right behind us while *Sorrow* roamed a block ahead. We steered our way through Keller’s domain on the south side of the river.

“I think he likes having me around. He still needs plenty of help.”

“I have an aunt in Maidenhall. Perhaps you could meet her sometime.”

“Perhaps. I’ve heard that business is calming down, especially in Southport.”

“Really? Any idea why?”

“My uncle has new investors from Westlake and Maidenhall. Orders have been sent, and Southport won’t compete.”

“Westlake seems a bit rudderless at the moment. Know anyone that could help?”

“I have someone in mind if I don’t kill him first,” she replied.

"That's the best kind of help to have around. Just ask my bodyguards."

Lankes and Lorde saluted as Ayla glanced back at my two stout shadows. I could feel the pair's mutual confusion, chaperone duties being beyond their purview.

"And your new inquisitor?" said Ayla. She was concerned with the changes she saw around me.

"A friend with talents."

"Friendly talents, you say?" Ayla's coy grin left plenty unsaid.

"Not that kind. Snow's a pauper."

"Really?"

Vigil Snow's inquisitor had a *clear sight* ability to perceive pain and corruption and a talent for holding a person physically still for a brief time. He was a great doctor but didn't have the vision of my sister Hart or Inquisitor Jillian Stone, and he lacked the subtle ability to pull on others like the two women could. Hart did it with her touch, being able to drag me back from the brink of Hell or insanity. Jillian seemed to have a similar sway with her voice.

"Ayla, I had the strangest dream this week. A cat waved a checkered flag and told me that the Moon needs company. Perhaps you have a sister with a heart that could help explain it all."

Ayla's horse stopped walking. "And where will you be?"

"My poor vision calls me north. I'll be chasing demons and ghosts before the spring thaw. But first, a visit to the Duke of Breen and some wagering over a weasel if it's early enough."

"That sounds exciting. Could we go along?"

"My dearest young lady, I wish that I could take you with me, but I fear it will be a hellishly long trip. Your family needs you here, while mine needs me elsewhere."

"Elsewhere? For how long?" Another worthy accusation had been made for many, and yet one that I wasn't ready to answer.

We were almost to the front gate of the Keller estate, guards and watchers everywhere. *Sorrow* was perched on the wall, invisible to the men around us.

I paused for a moment, speaking through the silent link between us and watching Ayla's face. "I don't know," I said, offering the answer to

a different question, and Ayla knew it. "But *Sorrow* is your companion until then."

How can one forgive that?

"*Sorrow* is poor company, and I wish you would stay longer." Ayla's eyes glassed over.

Neither of us was ready to move on.

"I've tarried too long already, but please pass on my regards to your aunt and uncle." I reached out and took Ayla's hand, passing her a pair of heavy rings, the weight of two cities pressing into her palm. "Ayla'sen, please know that you are now free to choose your own path."

"You are so much like my brother. I'll not forget you." Tears had begun to roll from the young woman's exotic, downcast eyes.

"Nor I, you," I whispered back.

Ayla's parting touch was the last thing that I felt that night and for many days to come.

Part 2

Swords and Dire Winds

Chapter 13

The Gray Princess

“He doesn’t even look the same, and his touch is different; it doesn’t pull on my heart with the same intensity. It’s almost as if someone else is in there with him pushing back.” With each day on the road from Maidenhall, Raven was becoming more and more agitated.

“And who else could that be, Rae? After that fight north of Stonnberg, I’d say he’s the emptiest of us all and simply looking for a grasp on his life.” For a dark elf blademaster, Andarion’s touch of the subject was more than deft, striking right at the heart of the matter.

Ara Storm wasn’t the same, not chained but scarred, nonetheless. Andy had long known Ara’s loyalty and determination, which made the young man’s haunted eyes and drained countenance all the more difficult to behold. It certainly wore on Raven Ylamil, that and the slap to her pride at being sent packing to the East. She’d tried to control Ara’s path, and he had countered by giving her a mission that she couldn’t refuse.

The four travelers had reached the foothills of the Ironbark Mountains and the cold, wet city of Hillsborn. The Spitting Duck had a great fire pit, and a mixed crowd spread about the dining area. Becks and Viren were upstairs enjoying each other like the pair of newlyweds that they were. Raven and Andy had the early watch and a chance to unwind Raven’s high-strung mood.

“His hold better not be with the Gray Wind, or I’ll gut that bitch,” she blurted, turning some heads in the room.

“Don’t kick a dog when it’s down, Rae. Especially if you’re supposed to be that dog.”

“Remind me why I agreed to take this mission. I’m supposed to be with my husband, helping him recuperate and ensuring that he doesn’t get himself in any worse trouble. How can I do that from across the damn border?”

“Rae, last I remember, you weren’t that much taller than my knee and already chasing me around with your sword. Ara is relying on you and Becks to lock down the continent’s eastern half while he tackles the rest. I’m not sure how he could get himself into any more trouble than that.”

The rain had eased up outside as dusk descended along the slopes of the rugged border town.

“Stay here. I’m going for a walk,” Raven stalked away, needing to burn off some of her frustration. She was a fighter and a champion for Ara’s cause, but she’d never been forced to act with anything more than her sword.

Andarion saw that and needled her for it. Ara had set her on a new path and pushed her away. As much as that irked her, Raven felt a deeper sense of uncertainty. Could she succeed in doing what her husband needed her to do? Could she act with the same resolve as her beloved? The answer to that last question was clearly ‘No’ as few, if any, in the world could match Ara Storm in that regard.

She’d been raised to defend herself and her bloodline in the dark elf court at Bastian but being far down the line of succession and a half-breed to boot, she hadn’t learned how to wield a political axe or grind her opponents down with more subtle maneuvers. On the other hand, Ara had been raised as an orphan in a frontier city. Where had he found that ability? Was it part of his *Firefanged* title that Hart spoke about? Or was there another aspect ingrained in him that steered his way forward? Rae had her own legacy to draw from as a dark elf and an Ylamil. Whatever happened, she wouldn’t let her father or her frustrating husband down.

Tucked into the Ironbark Mountains, the border city of Hillsborn hosted caravans from all across the continent. The foursome had ridden with one traveling up from Maidenhall. They would find another train to escort northeast on their way to Hollen once they had confirmed Hillsborn’s support for the Scarred Man. The caravans

attracted a mix of races and faces, including elves, both light and dark, that found the slanted border city of Hillsborn to be a rough yet relaxed place to mix.

The dark elf city of Lieve was situated less than a week's ride to the south, deep in the Ironbark mountains. Raven had never been this close to it before and found herself feeling curious as a pair of elves trailed her toward the city plaza. Not many folks were out on this miserable evening, making everyone conspicuous to her sharpened eye.

The city square offered an open area to confront her watchers and a route to the blacksmith shop of the local boss. Ara had never given her the man's name, leaving her to believe that he didn't know it either. It was utterly like him to miss that detail as he crashed through the obstacles that blocked his way. The familiar thought broke through the funk that plagued her, forcing her to smile for the first time in days.

"A pretty woman such as yourself shouldn't be out alone after dark. Perhaps you'd like some company." It wasn't a question, not with the menace that the man's voice offered. He was backed by three others, including a giant-sized thug with a long, heavy baton resting on his shoulder.

Raven thought that she'd be hard-pressed to block the bat with her lighter sword, but that didn't mean they'd be able to touch her. While she wasn't in the mood to play nice, she kept her sword in its sheath and stood her ground. "Four ugly men such as yourselves shouldn't be out any time, day or night."

The giant frowned while the other three smiled at her challenge, pulling out their axes and short blades. Raven held herself in place, statue still with her eyes on the face of the lead mouth, considering her options. The last thing she needed to do was kill four men, likely those of the boss, on her first night in town.

"Step off, Benzo!" The pair of trailing elves arrived in a hurry and squared off with the four men. "Leave the half-breed alone, or you'll regret it."

"Or what, Half Moon?" Benzo seemed more than happy for the challenge, his four against the smaller framed two.

Rae figured that was the reason for the confrontation in the first

place, providing a way to draw her watchers in for a beating.

"Or you'll have Boss Kincaid stepping over your dead body as a reminder to the rest of us. You haven't checked out her backside like we have."

"I'm sure it's quite a sight. Maybe we'll check it out when we're done with you," said Benzo. He was a lovely fellow, sporting sharp eyes, a broken nose, and a few missing teeth. He'd seen his share of crooked scrapes.

Raven crossed her arms at the exchange, wondering how she should feel about it.

"Our apologies for Benzo, Miss. He often acts without seeing the bigger picture."

"Are you saying that my backside is the bigger picture?" Rae retorted.

"Ha, no, not at all," the elf smiled. "It's as fine a picture as any I've ever seen. If you'd show it to Benzo, I'm sure he'll be glad to leave us all alone."

Raven blushed at the compliment and the odd request from the elf. "And what is your name?"

"Sendal Half Moon, Lady. And this is my partner, Loro Dawn. We met your husband when he came through the city a month or two ago."

"How do you know—," Raven stopped, an image coming to mind. She spun slowly around, showing everyone her backside.

The spotted leather sheath that she wore across her back, one that matched the rare exotic leather covering of Ara's broadsword, was unmistakable, even in the square's dim light. By the time she'd completed a full turn, everyone's weapons had disappeared as if by magic.

A familiar voice arrived, "Any trouble, Rae?"

"No, none at all," stated Benzo. "We were only welcoming a newcomer to our city and wondering if she intends to meet with the boss during her stay."

The two elves eyed Andarion with suspicion, and Loro admonished Sendal, "Don't do it."

Half Moon, for his part, stepped back and drew his saber, pointing it at the blademaster. "Show me your blade, dark one."

Andarion obliged. The appearance of his black blade drove the pair of elves down onto their knees, both bowing low before Raven.

“Princess, we had to be sure. Your presence honors us. Why are you here without your prince?” Half Moon sounded almost hurt by the situation.

The question should have irked her, but the elf’s last two words warmed her heart instead. Ara was her prince, and they were a pair no matter what.

“The duty of a Gray prince has many demands. I’m here to rally the hands of Hillsborn in his name. There are threats from the East that may cross the border any day.”

“Some already have,” Benzo interjected. “A pair of Fuga bounty hunters came in with a caravan last week but never made it out alive. They were asking about the Scarred Man and were ignorant of our loyalty. Boss Kincaid used his big hammer, and we all watched.”

The description of the smith’s violent methods matched those that Ara had shared before they left.

“Who sent them?” said Rae.

“The first man never talked. He only screamed as the boss worked his way upward from his feet. The second had seen enough of that and confessed that they’d been hired by House Lampe in Tannoo. The boss returned the kindness, starting at the top with him.”

“Then, I should do the same,” Rae replied. “Perhaps Master Benzo would show us the way to Smith Kincaid.”

While Hillsborn hosted several blacksmiths, only one was in charge of the city’s shadier dealings. Where Ara had a youthful, innate strength about him, Boss Kincaid was stacked. Shirtless beneath a leather apron, he pounded out a steel chestplate, working until it was configured to match his own muscle-bound chest. Raven took the time to admire his form, feeling it wrong to interrupt as a thin sheen glowed and rippled across the man’s arms and neck. Here was a simple power, one owned completely by another, and she sought to test that now.

She spoke loudly over the clang of metal, “Who gave you that scar on your arm?”

The smith didn’t look up from his task. “Who’s asking?”

“I am.”

Her answer halted him, causing the boss to turn and smile. He dropped his hammer on the bench behind him and moved closer, staring down at Raven with a challenging look. His worn leather shared an iron-stained musk that sought to turn her.

Raven, for her part, didn't retreat. She reached out and pressed one finger into his rock-hard pectoral, keeping him from leaning in on her. “Don't pretend you don't know who I am or why I'm here.”

“Ha!” he backed a step away. “What says your mate?” Perched within his smoky hillside roost, the man seemed to accept the pecking order.

“He says to keep watching the passes and support us as we move into Hollen.”

“The province or the city?”

“Both.”

“Hollen is well beyond my domain,” he replied. “What does he expect us to do?”

“You're asking the wrong question. You should be asking yourself how you became the boss of Hillsborn and how another could replace you.”

“Is that a threat?”

“A Gray war is a threat. The Scarred Man values your loyalty and strategic position. Protect yourself and your city. Keep this door closed to any trouble.”

“You think I can't protect myself—”

Raven's black sword flashed from its scabbard, halting at the side of Kincaid's neck. Her chest emitted a low vibration. Her eyes glowed in a wicked shade of gray, a color felt by those standing behind her. Everyone took a step back, except the smith.

“Master Kincaid, you and I are achingly alike. We both live in a world of the Gray Prince, fully owned by his charm, but only one of us seems to understand how dangerous that world really is.”

Before the blacksmith could acknowledge her words, Raven flicked her sword upward, slicing through the edge of Kincaid's ear, leaving her own mark on the burly man.

“What the feth was that?” he fumed.

“A message,” Raven replied. “It’s not for you, so don’t lose it.”

He quickly calmed at her commanding tone. “Is that all?”

“Be prepared to do without your elves for a while. Half Moon will be coming with us to Hollen.”

“Benzo will be wholly disappointed,” the boss grinned at his well-worn second. “And if you’re feeling adventurous, you might visit Groene, a few days southeast of Hollen. There, you might find what you need, and Half Moon certainly knows it well.”

“What is it that we lack?” Raven asked.

“Judging by the size of the Houses in Tannoo, an army.”

“Why would we need an army when we have the Gray Wind?” Rae sheathed *Talon*. “Please make sure that all the caravans east and west carry that news.”

Chapter 14

The Hollen Connection

Hollen should have been simple enough to reach and feasible to hold, but the Gray Houses of Fugaku weren't as slow or dependable as expected. Blinded by greed, they were downright determined to poach what wasn't theirs, and Raven was beginning to understand a bit of what Ara had faced during his time in Tannoo.

Viren Drake had suggested they hook their horses to the next Caravan going to Hollen and make their way through the mountains on foot, traveling only at night. The rough mountain passes would be slow enough either way, and the Fuga high country was the perfect landscape for an ambush; the passes were narrow and easily guarded. The six elves that they'd picked up in Hillsborn had agreed, and now, three hard days of hiking found them overlooking a provincial road that ran north toward the horizon and the city of Hollen. A quarter-mile below them sat a symptom of the empty House of Na'am. Raiders had formed an armed camp, blockading the point where a trader's track left the foothills. The crew was shaking down the caravans for goods and information.

"Do we go through them or around?" said Sendal Half-Moon.

Sendal and his elven brothers held standing back across the border due to their connections in Hillsborn. They'd have little sway this far east, except with their sabers.

Becks fought for control of her rage. Hollen Province was her family's domain, and the trade routes were important to everyone. The deals had already been struck that defined the caravans' contributions and her House's interactions with the trade routes. "We'd be taking an

unnecessary risk to walk straight to them, but I need to know who they are and which House, if any, is backing their mistake. If they claim they're from House Na'am, I'll gut them all myself."

Viren had seen his share of enemy encampments during his time in the Fuga Recon. He smiled at his wife's ire, knowing how he'd handle the situation. "If your father were alive, he'd say that the Gray Wind blows tonight."

Drake's words had varying effects around their little group, and Becks noticed. "Raven, are you OK? You look ill."

The younger woman seemed shaken. Raven was a protector, not an assassin. She'd been renamed 'the Gray Wind' for this mission but, for various reasons, couldn't fully stomach the role. "I don't know. I don't know anything about those men below. Who are they?"

"Should I go down and ask them?" Becks began to stand up.

"NO!" said Raven. "Let's do as Viren suggests and wait until dark. They'll be more willing to negotiate by then, and our eyes will have an advantage."

Becks planned to negotiate with each of the three dozen men waiting below. She spent the rest of the afternoon explaining to Viren, Raven, and the elves how she meant to do it and what it would mean for her House.

Rebekah Na'am had officially reclaimed her standing in Hollen but still walked far from her seat as she stumbled wearily down the rough terrain. Raven grabbed her arm, pulling her erect. The half-elf's night-vision outlined the camp ahead and the standing watch.

"Slow down! You'll fall!" Raven shouted. "We're almost there!"

Armed with sabers and knives, a pair of sentries met them at the edge of the camp. One carried a crossbow on his back.

"What the feth do we have here? The night was getting cold, but not anymore." The taller of the two watchers spoke with a city accent, not the wind-swept drawl of the Fuga Steppe.

"I think I twisted my ankle. Help me into the camp, would you." Becks spoke loudly and with a tone of command, drawing even more attention. "Who's in charge here anyway?"

Raven followed a step behind, keeping her head down and a

blanket wrapped around her shoulders as screams and the sound of blades clashing in the woods off to their right startled the camp into action.

“It’s the elves!” Becks screamed. “They attacked my caravan!”

Men ran to the eastern edge of the camp to defend against the sudden threat, and the woods beside the road erupted into a swirling mass of swords and leather-clad armor. Horses screamed on the northern side, and the thunder of hooves rolled away up the uneven road in the deep dark of midnight. More men ran to chase them down. Standing motionless in the middle of the tents and a few waning cooking fires, the two women were quickly forgotten.

Becks found a torch and began lighting the sleeping tents on fire, adding smoke and further chaos to the scene, but she left the largest of the tents alone.

The sounds of fighting continued in the woods farther to the east, but with their horses scattered and their tents on fire, a few reavers began returning to the camp. Finally, the crew’s leader appeared, wielding a saber and yelling for his men to return. He was younger than Becks expected, being in his late twenties and close to her age.

Noting the torch in the woman’s hand, the man in charge shouted at Becks, “Who the feth are you?”

Becks kept her cool. “I’m the one that just carried off all your loot. Thanks for collecting it for me.”

The leader turned and ran for the largest tent, throwing back the flap and ducking inside.

Becks shouted at the nearest men, “Who hired you?”

They anxiously looked over at the big tent, waiting on their leader as Becks threatened them with her fiery brand.

“Which House?” she screamed. “Answer me, or you’ll meet mine!”

At this, Raven threw off her blanket, drawing *Talon*. She shivered among the fires raging around the camp, and a low growl further disturbed the many hands assembled there. The men all felt the alien vibration in their hearts, whether their ears heard it or not.

The first man to make a move in the pair’s direction lost his head, and the two behind him went down in a blur.

A shout from inside the loot tent rang out. “Lampe hold! Lampe

hold! Everyone, sheathe your weapons!” The voice of a sergeant drilled the night, and the hands responded, backing away from the women.

Becks howled in a rage, “House Lampe on your knees! Front and center and on your knees!”

The sergeant’s voice echoed her shouts from the tent, appending them with a warning, “She brings the Gray Wind!”

Moments later, Viren Drake emerged from the tent dragging the body of the Gray leader. The Lampe hand was lacking three fingers and his left eye, but he’d never miss them.

A dark elf appeared beside Raven, her cousin Andarion. He’d been their back up, and after clipping away a few of the outpost’s watchers, he’d guarded the women from a shadow at the southern edge of the camp.

A third of the reaver crew was gone, lost in the night or dead, but twenty sat in the middle of the smoldering clearing, watching their fate burn away.

“You are in Hollen Province! Who sent you here?” Becks kicked the nearest man in the head. “This is the domain of House Na’am! And by the Gray rules, your lives are now ours!”

One brave idiot shouted, “Na’am is dead! The Gray Wind is gone!”

Lady Na’am’s boot found his chin. “Do I feel like a ghost? Does anyone here want to challenge the Gray Wind? Anyone?”

Viren Drake began hog-tying the men, one by one. His Army training came in handy, tugging at them for information on Hollen City and any other moves Lampe might be making. By the end of his task, two more hands were dead, sixteen remained tied up, and the two youngest were held to one side after they both identified the cohort’s leader as Gavin Lampe, the third son of Carolus Lampe of Tannoo.

Sendal Half Moon and his group of elves trickled into the smoke-filled camp and cleaned their blades on the dead men’s shirts, offering a small gesture between Houses. The elves’ nocturnal eyesight proved a sufficient advantage for the elven hunters.

“What should we do with these two?” Sendal had another side to him once he’d shed a bit of blood. He licked his lips eagerly at the sight of the two youngest captives.

Loro Dawn stood with his arms crossed, smiling at his partner's belligerent mood. He'd seen it enough times to know it wouldn't last. It never did.

Becks hadn't let anything go. She'd carried a vendetta of personal loss against the Gray rulers of Tannoo for eight years. "Take them to Groene."

"Now?" said Loro, suddenly sickened by the prospect.

Groene was a secluded cesspool for deviants and slavers and a pit for those not fortunate enough to die first. The feuds of the borderlands fed their appetites and coffers.

"Yes, now. They're yours, so don't waste their lives by lingering here with us." Becks drew her dagger, a useful gift from her half-brother, and pointed it due east. The weapon was made of Maidenhall's finest steel, and it would suit her fine as she dealt with the situation in Hollen.

"And the rest?" said Loro.

"They're too valuable to waste on the whims of dark elves or the slavers in Groene. They'll be going home with us."

Tiso Lin had remained as manager of the governor's estate and was overjoyed to see Rebekah Na'am again. He'd watched her younger sister, Tila, ride off into the night with Yan Magata, the legendary Rathven assassin, hot on her horse's trail. It had been months since the soul-cracking event, and having helped raise the Na'am siblings, he couldn't accept the dark outcome.

Lin had greeted Rebekah Na'am in the courtyard of the family villa. He held her hand, bowing his head and checking for ghosts. "And your sister?"

Becks had a difficult choice to make. She knew that Tiso Lin was devoted to her family but couldn't risk a slip that would put her sister back on the list of Gray House targets. The sadness of that thought showed upon her face, and Tiso Lin nodded, echoing her emotions and knowing that he would never see the younger woman again.

They'd carried the body of Gavin Lampe home with them. He was hung on the wall outside the Na'am estate on a hill overlooking the city. He'd been gutted on the way north, reducing the smell and the

bloating that would have leaned too far toward the grotesque.

Each of Hollen's cardinal gates was adorned with the freshly hung bodies of four Lampe hands. The bodies were positioned high enough on the walls to avoid feeding any wolves; the steppe wolves were only slightly less popular in Hollen Province than Tannoo interlopers. Better than flags, the bodies signaled a return to normal for the city with the knowledge that a Na'am governor had resumed their claim.

Becks spared nothing in getting word out that a Na'am had returned to Hollen as Provincial Governor and sent word to the Crown confirming her arrival. She appointed her husband as the acting Major of the depleted Hollen Recon section, awaiting official word from Colonel Reno in the capital. Drake immediately assigned one of its two platoons of Recon Troopers to guard the governor's villa and sent out patrols to scout Hollen Province for bandits cutting roads in any direction.

Raven and Andarion traded shifts guarding Becks, but the new governor spent most of her time within the high-walled villa waiting for the expected responses to the House of Na'am's surprise resurrection. All visitors were welcome, though none were as pleasing as the first.

Barely a week after they'd arrived in Hollen, a company of one hundred Fuga Reconnaissance troopers marched through the city's gates, escorting Colonel Lan'ion Reno and bolstering the city's meager garrison. The previous year, Fugaku's provincial Recon sections had been overrun by the burgeoning forces of the Infernal Horde during a Nantine incursion at the northern border. Reno still owed Company Storm for saving what was left of his division, and he arrived with the intent to secure Hollen for House Na'am.

Colonel Reno seemed perfectly at home as they all sat for dinner his first night there. The older officer and Viren Drake shared a hard-earned respect built on similar experiences and plenty of common connections, including those in the dining room. "Lady Ylamil, how is the Wind Catcher these days?"

Raven felt like she was retracing Ara's footsteps, meeting all of the players he'd drawn into the game of the Gray Prince. Colonel Reno was a handsome sort, older by far, yet with plenty of life left to play his part.

“Colonel, my husband has his hands full at the moment. The winter has offered us new challenges, both Black and Gray, and we are trying to level things before spring.”

“Ara certainly had his hands full when last I saw him leaving Tannoo with all of the Gray Houses calling for blood,” the Colonel chuckled.

Raven’s face quickly alerted him to his error.

“Pardon me. I didn’t mean that he had his hands full with anyone in particular. He was in a difficult situation, much as you are now, trying to hold the Crown and our greediest families at bay following the death of Lord Na’am and the destruction of House Rathven.”

“And what of Sovereign Doyne?” said Becks. “Does she still hold a grudge against my brother?”

“Grudges, perhaps. She cares about control and safeguarding her own position. I dare say she’s more than glad Ara’s left the realm, and I wouldn’t doubt that she’s sanctioned the Gray Houses’ response against him.”

“That is troubling. How can she overlook his talent as Wind Catcher? What will she do when Niantia summons yet another horde in the Akio Valley?”

Reno chilled at the thought. “All I know is that we’re supremely unready for such an event. I spend my days recruiting and training the Recon Corps, but we’re unequipped to face that sort of threat. The Heavy Infantry is certainly more suited, that and the Crown’s Shock Cavalry, but they’re terribly expensive to maintain and only effective in the open and on level terrain.”

“Colonel, the City-State of Bastian prepares for a Nantine offensive. With luck, it will be the only attack by the northern realm this year. Ara has plans to counter it.”

“How?” he asked gently. “The next Horde will surely arrive fully formed and better focused on its target.”

Knowing that Wind Catcher was a demanding role, Reno had picked up on Raven’s concern. The prior year, he’d ridden into the Akio Valley with Ara, Raven, and Company Storm and a few days later had escorted an entirely different group southward. The horses and riders were all accounted for, but the week’s conflict and complexity had taken a heavy toll on everyone, including Raven Ylamil.

Raven didn't have an answer. "Colonel, what would you do if you were the Wind Catcher?"

"I'd strike at its source, behind the lines, removing the leaders and sowing chaos in the ranks."

Viren Drake was an expert with that tactic but had to disagree. He'd learned plenty from the Order's officers over the past year. "The Infernal Horde is built upon chaos. To kill the generals without a way to trap the Horde would only unleash it to run further amok. Ara knew this and used it to his advantage as he countered the Nantine aggression in the Akio."

It was Becks's turn; her tone was less gentle, "Viren, how?"

Becks had never seen Ara operate as the Wind Catcher or as Vigil Storm. She'd only ever known him in his half-settled state of gray, and even though her adopted brother scared her at times, not having him around to settle any dark dealings worried her more.

Raven had been there when it happened. "Ara negotiated the turn of one of its generals. The Hell-knight was clever enough, with a small Infernal Horde at its disposal, to ambush and destroy the Nantine Vanguard Army as it marched into the Akio."

Viren Drake had been scouting the Valley and had seen the Horde suddenly reverse its course. He'd felt something darker than the Horde emerge and take control of the controlling Black Wind. He'd even met it and attempted to kill it later that night. "Negotiate, how?"

Although she'd been with Ara for the whole nightmarish campaign, Raven couldn't explain further. "It's what he does," she said softly. "But not who he is."

Lan'ion Reno had heard enough to know that someone had made a huge mistake. "And instead of welcoming him with open arms, the Fuga Crown used him and threw him away."

Fugaku's remaining seers would be his Corp's executioners, sending him and his men to their grave whenever the Black Wind roared again.

Chapter 15

Conclave

“We’ve made a grave mistake,” said Laila Storm.

Around the meeting room at Sturgess Hall sat House Storm, including Cressida and Yseria, both looking better rested. Ben Heck, backed by five Knight-Guards of the Realm, was also present.

Laila met all of their faces as she explained the situation and was having difficulty figuring out where to begin. She finally chose the most recent event and figured that things in the past or the future would find their way into the light.

“This morning, Cressida, Ben, and I met a man at the Lucky Star Inn in the Garden of the King. It wasn’t totally clear if he’d been sent there by Ayla or by my brother, but he delivered several messages concerning us all, and before you ask, nothing was written down, and the Gray war continues.

“Mister Quick, a watcher formerly of the Hamport domain, admitted to recently meeting my brother and being one of the few survivors of an overly violent night in Bridgeton. Quick has found himself under the influence of the Gray Prince and Ayla Storm.”

The image of this brought a few chuckles to the room. Ayla was a bit of a legend when it came to manipulating friends and foes alike, and she was one of the few beyond Raven and Hart that could turn Ara’s horse.

“A violent night?” said Captain Hartwell.

Laila continued, “Bridgeton is a hub of transport for the southern half of Colivar. As such, it’s also a hub for the Grays and a vibrant arena for the use and exchange of power. When Ara arrived there a

fortnight ago, the city was run by a Gray coalition, a threesome of bosses from Southport, Westlake, and Hampport. By the end of his first night, he had shattered the Triad leaving the Westlake-backed faction in sole control of Bridgeton's Lower Districts.

"Westlake and Bridgeton now align with the Gray Prince, while Southport, saddled by its own internal struggles, has failed to respond. Hampport and Stonnberg have also been silent, seemingly cowed by certain events involving a misplaced herd."

"A herd of cows?" said Hartwell.

Beside him, a handsome, slender woman sat quietly composed. Tila Na'am, now Vigil Wind, knew the effects of a Gray House war better than most as she'd been the involuntary catalyst for the underworld conflict that was rolling across the continent.

"Hitmen," replied Tila. "Mercenaries."

"How many?" Captain Hartwell's role often required such information.

"Forty, each toting doses of Black that would multiply their strength and speed." Laila paused, letting things sink in before continuing. "Hampport took their best shot for control of Bridgeton, using an attack on the Gray Prince as cover and lost heavily. Southport too. Ayla and Ara kept Westlake's interests alive, barely, and cut a midnight deal to bring Bridgeton safely into our domain."

Tila had seen other Gray House deals negotiated, and it was never a quick or simple thing. "What did Ara give them?"

"Along with sole control of Bridgeton, he gave them his younger sister."

Lynda Snow felt a kick in her belly at that and jumped up in protest. "Ara did what?"

Laila knew she'd get a response from the Storm Company Consul and was glad for it. "Lynda, as bad as it sounds, it wasn't a permanent arrangement, at least if I have anything to say in the matter. Ayla Storm has become the acting boss of Bridgeton until its original boss, a man by the name of Keller, recuperates or dies."

No one in the room seemed to scoff or wonder what had happened, but Tila Na'am sat in shock at the news. She understood the trades that Gray Houses made in sealing alliances, but this deal carried more

than a hint of desperation. Ara would never have willingly agreed to such a thing, not where Ayla was concerned. The Gray Prince was only a persona and a means to an end for him. Its calling wasn't in his heart and would never allow him to trade away one of his sisters. This act, more than anything, gave credence to the grave mistake that Laila had mentioned.

Ignoring the more serious implications for the moment, Laila continued, "This brings us back to Mister Quick. He'd been given a short yet cryptic message to carry in his head:

'A checkered flag;

Early to Stonnberg;

Storm to the moon;

Though wind and snow remain,

One can't arrive too soon.'"

Lynda Snow's quick mind tore through the words. "Those are orders as much as clues. Why didn't Ara send this to Sturgess? He knows that Vigil Wind, Captain Hartwell, and I are all here."

"It was a message for his House, not merely his company," said Laila. "We all need to discuss it together and comprehend its context. I wish Ayla were here with us."

Ben shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He hadn't slept nearly enough in the past few weeks, and even if he agreed with his sister's concern, he didn't know what they could do about it.

"And the grave mistake?" said Lynda Snow.

Laila couldn't answer, her throat suddenly constricted and dry, but Hart knew the answer going in. She'd talked it through with Sevin the day before and found it beyond her means to address.

"Ara Storm is unchained," said Hart.

"Meaning?" said Juno Hartwell. He had a bad feeling about where this was headed, one among many in the room.

"Meaning that he didn't survive that fight with the *Get of the Damogir* like we'd all hoped," said Cress. "I know more than anyone what a *Kjaira* can do to one's heart. It can protect. It can destroy. But it can never heal."

Laila nodded to the young woman, "I saw Ara the other day, standing alone in a Hell-cave of all places, somewhere in the

mountains beyond Westlake. Ara spoke through our connection as he struggled with his heart, showing me images that I'd seen before. He felt severed and confused, a cold weapon in a hot cave. My brother is deeply broken, fighting a Gray war and working himself toward something even worse. In doing so, he's creating more distance between himself and his House as he loses all trust in his heart," said Laila.

"You're assuming that he even has a House or that he can still love with his heart so completely severed." Cressida Storm had lived a life cut off from the chance to experience love with anyone, not until she'd met her wayward brother, and in her new awareness, she suffered for it even as she survived.

Having already experienced a waning connection to her brother, Hart Storm trembled, "Laila, did he say what he will do?"

"Hart, your brother's heart survives, and, isolated though it is, it must steer his path forward. I feel we made a terrible mistake by pushing him away when he needed us the most. We have to be ready to bear the consequences of whatever he does and trust that Ara knows them as well."

The spirited discussion affected everyone in the room, and Lynda Snow pinned her hands beneath her thighs, hoping they wouldn't shake. She focused on the message and its meaning, trying to understand their next steps, "Let's assume that they both sent the message; Ara sent it through Ayla. Assume that everything in the message can have two or more meanings or that their messages are mixed. 'A checkered flag' is placed first for a reason. It explains everything and aligns with what Laila and Cress are saying. To Ayla, it's a sign of Ara's illness, his loss, and a warning to us all, but to Ara, it would mean something else entirely. Why would Ara be concerned about a plague?"

Hart knew the answer to this question intimately, having seen the visions of a demon-driven plague plastered across Ara's mind after his mission into Death Valley the year before. Maidenhall had dodged an Infernal plague with the arrival of Company Storm, and the visions were the reason why Ara insisted on having the Vigil ever-present in the Capital.

As Inquisitor of Company Storm, Hart explained her thoughts, “An Infernal plague would threaten everything, and Ara knows that. Not only does it consume those that it touches, but it can also feed countless numbers of demons. Imagine the Horde that it could sustain, not hundreds, but thousands.”

Juno Hartwell cut in, “If Ara was in Westlake, then let’s hope he’s convinced Vigil Stone of the threat. Stone hoards his troops and never travels far, but he can see farther than anyone, and I can’t imagine that he would ignore something that might threaten the entire Realm.”

“Some things are obvious, aren’t they?” said Lynda. “Ara wants Early Vale in Stonnberg and Company Storm in Lockrun with Vigil Moon.”

“We still have time,” said Laila. “Winter blocks the Everest passes, and Ara must still solve Stonnberg and Hamport if he wants to settle the Gray war before spring. Having Early Vale meet him in Stonnberg fits that end.”

“The ‘wind and snow remains’ line is clear too,” said Lynda. “Ara doesn’t want Tila or me to leave Maidenhall, but paired with the next part of the message, it tells us what he’s planning. He’s going to cross the Everest Range before the thaw; he isn’t waiting for the spring campaign. Ara’s going into Niantia alone, and Ayla wants us all to move quickly.”

“He’s not waiting for Raven?” said Yseria.

“No,” said Hart. “His connections are gone, and he seeks to use that for what comes next.” Her arsenal of abilities displayed a new power as she froze the room solid with her assessment.

Yseria broke through the stillness, coming to her feet, “Raven must be told. Ara can’t reach her like Laila or Cress, and he should never have sent her to the East.”

Laila was starting to become angry, first at her younger brother and then at herself. “Yseria, we forced his hand on too many things at once, and he reacted in the only way that he knew. He agreed with our decision, using it to protect us all. Hollen must have the Gray Wind, or things could escalate at a critical time, and we can’t leave Rebekah Na’am unprotected. Ara would never forgive us.”

She didn’t mention that the entire Realm of Fugaku was

unprotected from whatever was lurking on their northern horizon. The Fuga Crown would find out soon enough or not.

Cressida stood. Her eyes still watered, and her breathing remained shallow, but she no longer shook from the pain and emptiness that she carried. The woman had learned to bear it without end, holding tight to a path made possible by many. "I will ride east. Yseria, sister, have you rested enough?"

The lithe dark elf hugged her. "We'll leave in the morning. We can cut through Dungarr on the way and warn Vigil Thorn."

"Take Rilo Tanika and Drake's dog. It'll be safer for you on the road, and Rilo will blend in well with the Fuga," said Ben.

"What about intercepting Ara in Stonnberg?" said Lynda. "How will Raven catch up if we don't stop him there?"

Mott Duncan thought that was a prudent measure. Ara was like a son to him, a gifted, prodigal son that had never found his true home. Still, as Ara's second, it was Juno Hartwell's decision to make.

The captain sorted through the orders. "Ara gave us our marching orders. Let's get into Lockrun with Vigil Moon as soon as possible. If things are going to be bad, Cat may already be feeling the effects."

Captain Hartwell took note of his senior scout's unhappy face. "OK, Mott, as much as we need you with us, take Cillian Redd to Stonnberg with Early Vale. From there, you can carry dispatches to Vigil Snow in Berykholt. Lynda, please inform the Judge immediately of the perceived threat to the realm."

"Meryl can go to Stonnberg with the Mott," said Lynda. "My brother can get them safely into the Duke's Hold and help deliver the news to Duke Ragir and Vigil Snow. The Duke is expecting a far more traditional military campaign against Niantia this spring."

"We still forget one key person," said Tila. "What about Ayla? She's too young to carry on alone. She needs more than *Sorrow*." Tila wasn't talking about running a city's Lower Districts but rather preserving the young woman's all-too-broken heart.

Laila agreed. "Ben, Lynda, do you think that, in light of the coming circumstances, the King could spare an escort?"

Ben liked the idea but had an easier place to start. "Laila, of anyone I know, you are the last person that Major Clarion Price would deny,

especially if it pertains to Ara's family."

The Major, an adjutant to the Army's Lord-General, had long been smitten with Laila Storm and had offered his constant friendship during her difficult time of recovery.

Hart offered one final, sobering comment, "Lynda, everyone, if an Infernal plague has taken hold beyond our northern border, there's a strong chance that the Realm of Niantia no longer exists, not in the way that anyone expects."

Chapter 16

Prince's Reach

The covered carriage rolled into the courtyard, a squad of mounted, steel-breasted troopers surrounding it, front and back. It was a local ride, the town's dust coating the coach's sides and those of the proud horses that pulled it. Stable hands hurried to attend the unexpected arrival, and a harsh voice barked out a command to close and bar the manor's gate. Sentries on the walls turned their heads outward, scanning the surrounding hill and the streets leading up from the city below. Beyond the walls, the area was vacant.

In the courtyard, the visitors dismounted, and an armed man in uniform, a survivor, worn yet tough with an intense stare, stepped forward to check the unexpected invasion. The coach stood empty, but a quick glance at the fine horses and the cavalry uniforms told the soldier enough about his adversaries and whom he should address.

"I am Major Drake of the Hollen Recon Section. Who might you be?"

The city attire, coated in dust, covered a civilian of middle years, armed with an ornate saber and an oil-filled smile. The visitor's eyes scanned the courtyard, noting the blood-stained cobbles and offering the merest hint of respect as he replied, "I am Angus Rhill, sent from the Crown with a summons for House Na'am."

On the far side of the continent, many miles to the west, a similar but less brittle scene played out, with the Lord-Mayor of Bridgeton offering his deepest respects to those eyeing his unannounced arrival. The cobbles beneath his feet were clean with not a speck of blood or a

horse dropping to mar the courtyard's complexion, and the Mayor's congenial demeanor did all it could to keep it untainted. The boundary between the Upper and Lower Districts was a fine line to cross without upsetting either side.

"Miss Keller, my sincerest apologies for the intrusion," said Mayor Sams. "I have the honor of presenting a visitor from the Capital and their Royal Guard."

Though sized for use by a large extended family, the courtyard had become crowded with a dozen Knight-Guards of the Realm. Each Knight-Guard wore a sturdy leather and chain blend and harbored an unbreakable surety of purpose. With shields and blades strung neatly across their backs, they were an immovable force in the confines of the setting, teeming with power and the threat of violence. In the middle of it all, a covered carriage held a woman of great importance to the King of Colivar. All in all, it was an uninvited invasion of the Gold into the realm of Gray. Civil wars had been waged for less.

Ayla'sen Storm, for her part, stood her ground, backed by her own small guard, one a bear of a man in stature, another a bear only in name. Around her neck hung a ring, ugly, heavy, and worn. It was a survivor of wars and a powerful sign for those that knew to look.

"Mayor Sams, my uncle is abed this afternoon. His health is returning slowly, yet he offers his best regards."

The coach's door popped open, revealing the woman as she stepped down, more handsome than beautiful, yet striking as she spoke, "And how is my sister doing?"

Rhill had taken every precaution in his approach to Hollen and its governor. The Na'am decree had been received in Tannoo, brought by courier to the Royal Court, laying claim to the seat in Hollen and the allegiance of Rhill, in that order. It had been a public declaration, a decree backed with blood and made for the Crown and all the Gray Houses to hear. In its simplest form, it was an invitation for war, civil or uncivil, and to avoid such would require a concerted effort on the part of the recipients.

Rebekah Na'am, Governor of Hollen, took a hard look at Angus Rhill. With his eager eyes, full mustache, and patchy beard, the man

matched her opinion of House Rhill. He wouldn't have been her first choice, but perhaps there was some advantage in that. Her first choice, in a previous life, had been Rathven and anything but wise.

"Angus, it's about time we were properly introduced. My condolences on the loss of your younger brother."

The sword on Rhill's hip was a sign of allegiance to House Na'am but had proven to be more style than substance thus far. The sword had cost Rhill his brother at the hands of a Gray House assassin by the name of Yan Magata. The bloodied cobbles outside were a witness to the slaying.

"I offer you the same for your sister." As far as Angus knew, the assassin had also taken Tila Na'am.

Becks nodded solemnly. "Have you met my husband, Major Viren Drake?"

Viren stood at her side in the Manor's comfortable den. "We met outside. I find it odd that he travels without his own men."

The armored cavalry troopers were Crown House Guard, the most elite and expensive troops at the Sovereign's disposal. As such, they were often used in a symbolic rather than a belligerent manner.

"With the unsettled past between our Houses, I found it suitable to follow the Crown's lead," said Rhill. "Sovereign Doyne asked that I escort you to the capital in all haste."

Sending the Crown Guard was a nice touch, but a spiderweb would still be sticky no matter how shiny and inviting.

"How are things in Tannoo? My brother has told me stories that I find hard to accept. He led me to believe that allegiance was owed by the House of Rhill." Becks glanced over her shoulder at Raven, standing quietly with her back to an oak-paneled wall.

The glance wasn't lost on Angus Rhill. "Lady Na'am, may I ask, first, who is the unfortunate ornament hanging outside on your villa's curtain wall?"

"Gavin Lampe. Poaching caravans in Hollen never pays. Did you know him?"

"Yes, and I fear that it will leave a stain on your pale walls," said Rhill.

"One can only hope. Angus, your timing is extremely fortunate, and

I think it's high time we visited Tannoo."

Rebekah Na'am was the blood inheritor of House Na'am. Her unabashed claim had echoed with a courier's resonance off the tall walls of the Sovereign's Crown Hall and the hundreds of citizens gathered between them. Her decree had been received with varying degrees of astonishment, admiration, and disdain, and the fact that the House of Na'am hadn't attended in person was a statement unto itself. Becks wasn't looking to argue. She simply stated a fact and let the Courts, Silver or Gray, deal with it as they thought best. Lacking any trust in the others, Na'am was prepared to do the same and defend its seat in Hollen, come one and come all.

Sovereign Doyne had other things on her mind.

The voice carried like a spear in flight, and the familiar tone guided it straight into her heart. Ayla Storm did her best not to stagger as she strode forward into the arms of Tila'sen Na'am, the newly anointed Vigil of Maidenhall.

"Sister," Tila whispered in her ear. "You have grown." 'Suffered' seemed a better word, but Tila had chosen carefully based on all that she saw around her.

Ayla stepped back, wiping her eyes before turning toward the Mayor. "Lord-Mayor, thank you for escorting my cousin. I will visit you again soon."

Suddenly realizing the familial connection, the mayor bowed and excused himself, feeling his duty had been done well and without upset.

Tila Na'am knew both sides of the ruling divide, having lived in Fugaku, where the border was easily blurred and even crossed by the Crown when it suited. She knew that she was risking plenty with her unsolicited visit and request but trusted her connection to the young woman, a sister-by-law and one that she cared for deeply. She'd seen the ashes, all that was left of Ayla's original family and village, and she'd seen the bones of their victims. As Seer of the Winds, Tila recognized the turmoil that spun inside the young woman and the healing that had yet to occur.

"I have come to escort you home," said Tila. "Your aunt is beside

herself and needs to see you. For the sanity of Major Heck, please don't object."

"I don't know if he'll be coming back," said Ayla, getting right to the point. "All that I have is right here."

Tila scanned about the yard, not liking the tough, silent looks she was getting from the nearby men and the watchers on the walls. *Sorrow* lounged on her side atop a far wall, catching the last of the afternoon's winter sun. Ayla was in safe, if not entirely soft, hands.

"Ayla, I must correct that misconception. Regardless of our brother's location or demeanor, you are part of a House that will not cease to care for you, even in times of war. Now, please introduce me so that I may make a suitable report to your aunt about her new cousins in Bridgeton."

"She's feeling guilty, isn't she?" Ayla could almost see Laila's grief mirrored in Tila's face. Her message to Maidenhall had hit home in more ways than she could have hoped.

"You had better believe it. Laila is frightened, and she knows that she has fethed up where it pertains to the Gray Prince. She's smart enough to admit it, and she's trying to make things right."

"Why the Royal Hounds?" Ayla didn't pretend that she wasn't impressed by the Knight-Guards' presence.

"They're my bodyguard outside the Royal Quarter." Tila took Ayla's hand and gently guided her aside. "Ayla, people are moving on your word alone. Even the King, if you can believe it. Lynda Snow was perfectly convincing when it came to explaining the concept of an Infernal plague."

Ayla knew. She'd grown up in a village that traded with a Pestilent god. Her brother had destroyed it completely, the village not the god, leaving Ayla severed from her past but not yet free to choose her path forward. She'd felt that she was entirely too much like her brother, only Tila was here to remind her that maybe she wasn't the same, after all. Ayla yearned for the connections, even when they were only business, savoring each. The one connection she treasured more than any other sat nestled across the small of her back, imbued within a death-demon's claw, the weave of two orphaned souls. Still, she couldn't deny Tila or Laila their concerned invitation. They were her family, too.

The Fuga Crown Guards made a fine escort, except for the dust that their heavy chargers kicked up from the road. The travel carriage acted as a baggage cart for most of the trip, allowing Becks, Viren, and their personal bodyguards to ride their own mounts and maneuver ahead of the cloying cloud.

Rhill did the same, trying to position himself where he could keep an eye on them all, still trying to gauge the threats each posed. Becks, for her part, reminded him far too much of her Colivarian brother, the Wind Catcher. She didn't play games; she went for the throat or whatever she deemed as appropriate. Her husband was a no-nonsense type, more of a bodyguard than an officer, and he spent far too much time sharpening that short blade of his.

Rhill had also taken note of their pair of bodyguards, but the dark elves kept to themselves. The woman was a half-breed, and both carried black blades. The wicked-looking sabers were made of some exotic substance known only to the devious and reclusive mountain dwellers. Rebekah Na'am offered them every respect, and Angus Rhill followed her lead, not yet knowing why. The rumors that he'd heard of the Gray Wind's return seemed to be made of dust.

Colonel Reno and a squad of Recon troopers met them at the gate into the Crown Quarter, and Angus Rhill took his leave to inform the Sovereign of their arrival. Becks and her party were escorted to a sparkling white stone manor nestled in the walled district's backmost corner. Three immaculate stories tall with a walled courtyard and fountain, the mansion's broad windows captured the cool, fresh breeze coming in from the Eastern Sea and offered spectacular views from the top floor. Though smaller than the sprawling family villa in Hollen, it was a far finer example of Fuga craftsmanship and wealth.

"My father was doing alright before they stabbed him in the back," said Becks as they dismounted.

Lord Na'am had been stabbed in the back, literally, while standing in front of the Sovereign of Fugaku. No recourse had been given by the Crown, though, in the end, everything was taken from the Gray House that carried out the execution.

Reno wasn't sure how to react to Becks's remark. He couldn't believe it was intended to be as flippant as it sounded. "Lady Na'am, this isn't your father's house, though I am sure you'll find it far more comfortable. This manor belongs to your brother, Colonel Storm, as the sanctioned abode of the Wind Catcher. Ara was overly fond of the large beds and warm baths, and Sovereign Doyne made it clear that you were entitled to use it."

Viren grabbed Becks's wrist, tugging her closer.

"And the Recon platoon?" said Drake. With Raven standing right behind them, he quickly put some distance between himself and Reno's 'large beds and warm baths' remark. He could feel the grin on Becks's face turn into a frown at the missed opportunity.

The gates, courtyard, and entrances to the mansion were all guarded by the elite light infantry troopers of Reno's Recon Corps. Each man wore a saber, a long knife, and an embroidered black flag on his sleeve.

"The Honor Guard of the Wind Catcher. They'll be present while you are staying in Tannoo. The Gray Houses have access to the Crown Quarter and are never far away, so please be wary when you go out. The Crown will be expecting your presence in the morning. In the meantime, please scrape off the road and get some rest."

"Colonel Reno, why is the Sovereign suddenly treating my House with some respect? I was under the impression that my brother was chased from the city at her decree. My husband was with him at the time."

"That's the Crown's business, Lady Na'am. I can only assume that we'll all find out tomorrow."

Chapter 17

Black Bets

“The Crown recognizes Rebekah Na’am as the sole heir of House Na’am and Governor of Hollen Province. As to the demands for recourse made following the death of Lord Almer Na’am, we offer a full pardon to Lord Ara Storm for the violent deaths of Fugaku’s citizens during his reign of terror, and we reinstate his official position as Wind Catcher. We also rescind our Decree of Exile for Cressida Magata, a woman known as the Gray Wind. Now that things have settled down in Tannoo, I feel it is safe for their return.”

The pleasantries had ended, and a message was being sent by the Crown back to Rebekah Na’am. Becks could only assume it was a cry for help after hearing the Sovereign reverse her course on so many prior decisions, but a cry about what, she could only begin to guess. If things had settled down, there was no reason for the Crown to take such a benevolent turn after surviving her brother’s so-called ‘reign of terror.’

House Lampe had been slapped hard in Hollen Province, and there would be blood exchanged in the future, no doubt, but this had little to do with the Crown and would more than likely keep Carolus Lampe out of the path of Sovereign Doyne.

The House of Rhill had been keeping a low profile, waiting for official word on the existence of Na’am and the chance to snag the vacant governorship in Hollen. Now that Sovereign Doyne had witnessed Rebekah Na’am’s official standing, Angus Rhill had every reason to remain in line where the Crown and House Na’am were concerned. By the Gray rules, Rhill was obligated to back Na’am’s

interests, and there was little Angus could do other than wait and see if Lampe or someone else struck first.

The Crown could sit back and let the Gray sharks bite each other into oblivion, and perhaps that was their play. Tossing one more lively shark into the Tannoo Bay would certainly make things interesting and keep another eager Gray House from rising too fast up the ranks. Nobody wanted another House Rathven, and yet nobody wanted the Gray Wind or Rathven's bane on this side of the continent either. That's what didn't make any sense—unless there was a bigger monster lurking on the horizon.

The Crown would only consider reinstating her brother as Wind Catcher if they felt a big enough threat breathing down their neck. Too bad the Crown had been beyond late with their decree. Ara had been riding in the opposite direction from Tannoo the last time Becks had seen him.

"Sovereign Doyne, thank you for your generosity. I accept your decrees, and if I ever see my miserable brother or his broken-down mistress again, I will let them know that they're free to return. In the meantime, perhaps it would be prudent to negotiate payment for your next decree before we receive its blessing."

Raven shuffled in place behind her, receiving the offhand response with even less joy than the Crown, if that was possible. Becks knew that she was jerking Rae's chain and seemed more than pleased with herself as she walked a fine line between insults and respect. *Fuga in-laws. Who knew?*

Sovereign Doyne certainly did. "Lady Na'am, please know that at times, you sound far too much like the Wind Catcher, and let me assure you that we never got along."

Becks knew that going in. She didn't care. She had her position to protect and the entire eastern realm to pacify while her brother did whatever he needed to do on his side of the continent. She'd been summoned for more than a Sovereign's seal of approval and wanted the Crown to get to the point. "Then, Sovereign Doyne, I will politely offer you a good day and see myself out."

Doyne cleared her throat. "Lady Na'am, there is one more audience today, and I had hoped that you would stay to witness it."

Becks bowed slightly at the simple request, "We are glad to serve." She moved to one side of Crown Hall's lengthy audience space, knowing that things wouldn't remain simple for long.

Behind them, Bann lone approached with his bodyguards and a small delegation of foreigners. The men seemed determined and more than a little irate as they worked their way to the front.

"Sovereign Doyne, it has now been more than a week, and my guests are still waiting for your response." Bann lone was the boss of the third-largest Gray House in Tannoo and obviously working a deal to move himself up in the ranks.

Doyne, for her part, scanned the room slowly, looking for something, some threat perhaps. The Crown Hall's rules allowed personal arms but no crossbows or other projectiles throughout the audience hall. If an argument wasn't going your way and you wanted to challenge someone in a suitably violent manner, you had better do it up close and personal. As for the white marble floors, they were easy to clean.

"Master lone, tell me again why you're here." Doyne had responded with an order and a challenge, bringing a confident smile to Bann lone's face.

The crowd that filled the gallery overlooking the ground floor of Crown Hall murmured with anticipation, many having witnessed a far different stance by the Crown only a week earlier.

Bann lone bowed and again introduced two men, both pale-skinned Nantines of military bearing. "Colonel Dagan Thule and his adjutant, Major Careck, arrived recently from Niantia with a request for the reopening of the northern border."

Dealing with a severe, slow-to-heal wound, the Colonel lacked a certain vitality beneath his loose-fitting civilian garb. He was unarmed, but not his aide.

"Master lone, while I laud your skills as an importer of the unsavory, why should I even consider that?" said Doyne. "It's only been six months since Niantia conjured their Black Wind and sent it south, killing hundreds of our citizens."

"Didn't we just hear you pardon the Wind Catcher for doing the very same thing?" lone made a fair point, but it was his tone, ridden with

contempt, that lost him the argument.

An unseen signal brought the Sovereign's Own forward, positioned to her right and left and a step closer to the three men standing on the open floor below. Eight elite Crown Guards kept their hands on their weapons and their eyes on the room, scanning for threats.

"Master lone, your attempt to mimic the stance of Mono Rathven leaves much to be desired. Perhaps we can hear from your suitors instead."

Colonel Thule bowed, grimacing with the effort and ignoring the Gray House power plays. "Sovereign Doyne, I am Colonel Dagan Thule, formerly of the Nantine Vanguard Army. While my commission still exists, my army does not. We have yet to fully comprehend the reign of terror that befell us."

"You will find my sympathy for your loss at the door, Colonel. I'm aware of what you attempted and what happened to your men, and I wonder at your good sense in coming here."

"I'm not here to claim any sympathy, nor do I dispute your claim to the Akio Citadel. Having survived the terror of our dark ways, I ask for asylum for myself, my family, and any Nantine citizens that can make it into the Akio Valley. Niantia suffers from a sinister presence that has plundered our realm."

Thule's limited confession quieted the large hall. Happenings beyond the Everest Range had always remained shrouded in mystery and fear. Having Niantia's current struggles openly admitted in the Crown Hall gave everyone pause and a chance to hear Doyne's opinion on the matter.

The Sovereign of Fugaku pressed on, taking advantage of the situation and her perceived control. She could sense the man's honesty, even if he left out the key details. "Colonel, why flee here? Why not stay and fight for your realm?"

"Your Highness, the Black Wind takes many forms. Master lone has promised his cooperation in exchange for certain goods in our possession, but perhaps we can offer the Crown a sample—," a dagger interrupted the Colonel's line of thought, a weapon that dove from the balcony above with a malignant dark blur attached to it.

Blades collided at the Colonel's ear; his adjutant's hand wielded an

exotic blade that easily turned the unstoppable momentum of the assassin's dagger. Two more figures landed, surrounding the pair of Nantines as the first assassin dropped to the ground thrashing about with a hole deep in its ear, and the gallery above erupted with shocked shouts and cheers.

Bodyguards all around moved to block the confrontation's spread, but no one interfered in the main event. Bann lone retreated into a screen of waiting hands, their weapons drawn in defense of their House. Raven and Andarion stepped forward, blocking the path towards Becks and watching the assassins' unnatural speed with concern.

The Colonel had ducked away from the initial attack, diving to the ground behind the Nantine Major. The younger man was obviously more of a bodyguard than an adjutant. The brilliant surprise of the initial assassin's attack had failed. The other two killers, dark-clad devils with daggers and swords, righted their balance and struck, coming in at every angle. The Major hissed, ducked, and spun, blocking one assassin's blade while dodging the other's unseen strikes. Flashes of metal were met and countered. The skill and speed displayed by all three had silenced the gallery in the handful of seconds that it took for the two assassins to meet their end, both handless and bleeding out from deep gashes in their necks.

Raven and Andarion had seen it all before and knew without a doubt what they faced in Major Careck. Taking no chances, they drew their black blades as the Major spun and eyed the group from House lone. Colonel Thule remained on the floor, hands flat, not daring to intervene or even move.

"Hold!" screamed Doyne. She'd seen enough. The Crown valued her personal guards' lives over the altercation playing out before her, even risking the chance that her order might draw the Nantine Major's attention. She would lose many, perhaps all, of her vaunted guards if the beast before her felt threatened.

A stuttering wave of fear rolled outward around the Hall, and Bann lone took a step back, along with his men. It wasn't a good look for the master of a Gray House, and certainly not the bravest way to meet his end.

Raven took stock of the scene. She knew the dire threat before her. Pointing at Colonel Thule, she nudged Drake, "Pick him up."

Viren Drake walked forward, his eyes locked on the Infernal agent in their midst, and helped the colonel to his feet. Having seen the *Get of the Damogir* in action, Drake knew how badly this could end.

Major Careck turned his head, almost daring House lone to make a play as he looked away, but they were done, cringing in fear with their backs against a serenely paneled wall. To Drake, the adjutant's eyes were familiar, hauntingly so.

Raven felt Careck's gaze, an almost physical pressure, and she suddenly realized the emptiness that had grown in her life over the past few weeks. Her husband's unending presence was gone, lacking the merest hint of weight on her heart or the reach needed to shake her up and pull her attention to his side of the world. It shouldn't be that way.

Across the Crown Hall, the inhuman gaze of *Koki-Ten* stared back at her in triumph.

Raven growled, her inner *Kjaira* pushing its unreal challenge into the room, and as the dark vibration struck her opponent, Careck's eyes settled upon a fiery shade of red, waiting for her attack.

Enjoying the intense pressure of the hall, the Crown smiled at the stand-off, knowing that she had bet correctly in her desperation. She'd covered all the black squares and waited to see the outcome like everyone else.

Andarion stepped to Raven's side, placing a hand on her shoulder, "Show him, Rae."

There was no 'him,' only the shell of a man chained to a death-demon, a *Get of the Damogir* from the Realm of Niantia; the Damogir's deadly spawn was an Infernal weapon and nothing more.

Andarion the Blade perceived something else, while Raven wished that she could. She fought the battle in her mind, knowing that Ara had done the same once, and she felt the loss burn her soul. The truth was out there somewhere, running into the distance, leaving her caged within the Court of Tannoo. She could only listen to her cousin and play along.

Rae reached behind her back, slowly bringing her claw-dagger into

the light of the Hall for all to see.

Careck's eyes flickered at its sight, their fuse-burning glow fading back into a pale gray mask. Its voice sounded hurt, almost human, "How?"

"It's what he does," said Raven softly. "But not who he is."

"Who?" said Careck.

"The Wind Catcher."

"Then, I must meet him before it's too late."

"Too late for what?"

"The final chaining."

Chapter 18

Black Masks

“We will take him with us,” said Rebekah Na’am. “His presence in Tannoo will only incite further violence on the part of the Gray Houses.”

Becks had stepped forward and claimed Careck as payment from the Crown before anyone could think to object. Ione’s declawing had been Doyne’s wish all along, and Careck’s removal from the city was yet another favor for Becks to draw upon at a future date.

“What will you do with him?” said Doyne.

“Send him to the Wind Catcher. What else?”

That seemed to reach the agreeable part of the Sovereign’s mind, and she waved for their dismissal. “Colonel Thule will stay. We have serious matters to discuss concerning the prowess of Master Ione’s assassins and the fate of both our realms. After the Crown Hall closes, Colonel, please don’t feel offended if we keep you here. Your relationship with House Ione has ended.”

“Becks, where are we going?” said Raven. “Shouldn’t we be staying in the Crown Quarter with the *big beds* and *warm baths*?”

“We have one meeting to make before we retreat to Hollen in good order,” said Becks. “Besides, I’m hungry, and Major Careck looks famished. How about you?”

Raven shrugged.

“Careck, only Careck. The ‘Major’ part was simply a cover.”

“No last name?” said Becks.

“None, but I’m also known as First Fang by the Damogir of Niantia.

Will that do?"

"So, Careck it is. And your dagger's name?"

"Why do you ask?"

"My brother has one just like it, and he calls his *Koki-Ten*. He talks to it all the time."

"It's what he does?" said Careck, looking over at Raven.

"But not who he is." Raven tried to believe it, but the presence of Careck didn't help.

"Becks, your brother and I share much in common when it comes to weapons, though I don't talk to mine, at least not verbally. We have no reason to speak because it senses everything, often before I do, and only shares what it needs to share."

"You carry the Black." It wasn't a question coming from Becks.

"No, actually, it would be more accurate to say that the Black carries me, as it does all my brothers and sisters who are *Get of the Damogir*."

"How many *Get* are there?"

"Potentially hundreds, but only six are chosen at any one time to share the soul of *Koki-Ten*. Each *Get* carries a relic of the *Kjaira* incarnate and a shard of its soul." Careck paused, looking at Raven. "By the empty claw-dagger she carries, I must assume there are five of us left now."

"When you say hundreds, what do you mean?"

"Lady Na'am, the Damogir sires many children, using his right as Emperor to spread the first seed on any field. Leveraging his offspring, the *Get* are chosen through a blood challenge, and the weakest are culled."

"And the people of Niantia allow this?" Becks was furious at Careck's calm acceptance of such an oppressive system.

Viren reached out for his wife, "Dear, let's not rile the Black Wind. We've only just met the man."

"It has been this way for decades, and if a woman refuses, her family must remain within the Emperor's Walls, feeding our dark god in other ways. Some do refuse, but all come to regret it."

"And the citizens don't rebel?"

Careck smiled, "And do what? Fight a god? The Emperor's *Get* are around to ensure that the Damogir's mandates are followed, and any

troublemakers are destroyed. In this way, we protect our citizens.”

“And yet, we met you in the Court of Tannoo, protecting a Nantine Colonel that was looking to escape your Emperor’s benevolence. Has Thule’s daughter recently come of age?”

“Lady Na’am, your insight is a gift. His eldest, Hani, is on her way to guarantee her family’s freedom. If she survives the curse of the Emperor’s touch, she will return to her family.”

“Your realm is barbaric.”

“Having experienced your court and having stood where your father’s blood once pooled at the feet of the Sovereign, I find myself thinking the same about yours.”

Raven thought it a good time to change the subject. “Careck, what are you and the Colonel doing here in Fugaku?”

“Hoping to remove the cork from the Black bottle that is Niantia. Your father’s city in the Valley of Bastian is one possible cork. The northern Citadel in the Akio Valley is another.”

“My father?”

“You are Lady Ylamil, the Gray Princess of Bastian, are you not? You’ve long been known to us for the dark soul that you host.” Careck suddenly frowned as if he’d shared too much or been rudely interrupted. “You carry my brother Sago’s claw, but how is that possible? The Claws only hunt together as one.”

“There were five,” said Raven. She could sense the other’s calculating presence and saw it flash through Careck’s eyes in anger as it heard the truth. “Your brood has but a single soul shard remaining, Careck, and it is you.”

A bleak coldness settled upon Careck’s face. “The work of the Wind Catcher?”

Raven nodded, “My husband.”

“He knows not what he’s done.”

“*When has he ever?*” thought Raven.

“After such a fortuitous meeting, my day is ending in disappointment,” said Careck. “My broodkin are dead and gone, Lord lone is a fraud, and the Gray Princess has already chosen her mate.”

“What does my taking a mate have to do with this?”

“Everything. The Claws were supposed to capture you and bring

you to me.”

“And?” said Raven.

“You harbor a death-demon, one from a different brood. You aren’t bound by the Damogir’s Infernal contract. We have long sought your freedom and your unique skills.”

For Raven, the pieces were beginning to fall into place. “You want me to kill the Damogir?”

“I want an end to the contract that imprisons us all. But to do that, to get you safely into the Emperor’s city and into his dark presence, we would have to be wed. It was a worthy idea and even more so now that I’ve met you.”

Although he was a few years older than Raven, Careck carried a familiar, handsome smile and a demon-bred confidence that appealed to her darker half.

Raven smelled a dangerous player. “The female assassin, Second Fang, had other ideas. Any reason why she didn’t follow the plan?”

A brief battle erupted within Careck, an alien presence asserting control. *Koki-Ten* was an alpha with only a shard of a soul present but an alpha, nonetheless. Its weave was unbreakable, and it hurt Raven to see it dominate the man; an image of Ara passed before her eyes. Careck shed a single tear, a brief sign of humanity rolling down the night-stalker’s face as it denied the truth. “No, none at all.”

“And how would being wed to you have helped?”

“Qreyl, the Pestilent Prince’s city, is adrift in an Infernal plague. To safeguard the Damogir’s bloodline, the *Get* and their families are spared the effects, as are Nantine maidens such as Hani Thule, unless they prove barren.”

“If you knew that much about me, why didn’t you just ask my father, King Ylamil, for my hand? It could have brought peace to Bastian and avoided the coming war.”

“We did. We demanded it, but the King refused and sent you far away.”

“Into exile,” said Raven. “Almost to my death.”

“Fathers can be harsh. Be glad that you’ve never met mine.”

“The food here is good, and the ale is fresh, but the clientele can be

spotty.” Becks watched the pub’s front door while her husband kept an eye on the back.

Raven and Careck had finished their meals and their obscure conversation, having worked their way toward a peaceful coexistence that had nothing to do with Gray Houses or Tannoo.

“Becks, what are we doing here?” said Raven. She was leery of being forced to act based on Becks’s Gray House schemes. Sitting in the middle of Tannoo, waiting, seemed like an overly dangerous challenge in a city riddled with Gray bosses.

“We’re waiting for Carolus Lampe. I’ve got a feeling that I won’t have your services for long and want to make the right impression before we leave Tannoo.”

As if planned, the front door swung open at that moment, and a pair of stout, well-armed men came in, blocking the view of the diminutive fellow behind them. Carolus Lampe made up for in temper and drive what he lacked in height, carrying a disposition that favored results and soured friends. His spear-laden personality was easy to criticize, but he didn’t seem to care. His mask was a perfect fit for the Lampe family business, and like any good spear, he sailed straight for his rival’s table.

Raven and Careck stood, taking a step back to maintain the room’s balance, and Becks kicked out a chair, offering it to the boss of House Lampe.

Lampe sat. “I find your choice of menus to be surprising. Wouldn’t one of Rhill’s taverns be a safer bet?”

“We both know that isn’t true,” said Becks. “Besides, I prefer my meat hung out to dry before cooking.”

Lampe wasn’t put off by the ice pick of a remark, offering one of his own, “Last I’d heard, Mono Rathven liked his meals chained and well-basted.”

Becks grabbed Viren’s arm, keeping him in place at the table. It had been seven years since Becks had been bound, beaten, and raped in a Rathven basement. Lampe’s retort had been well-aimed yet blunted by her thick inner scarring and a changing of the Tannoo guard. Her adopted brother had done the changing in a most visible and violent fashion.

Besides, Becks wasn't there to kill Carolus Lampe; she didn't plan on starting another war within a war. They'd already proven their point and taken their pound of flesh for the Lampe interlopers in Hollen. She intended to build a more lasting understanding that would keep the bosses awake at night and safely positioned within their own Gray House walls.

"Master Lampe, you've met my brother?"

"I have. That's a boy with a streak too black and a stomach too large for his own good, but I don't see him here now. Do you?"

"You can thank the Crown for his exile and his sanctioned return," said Becks. "A streak can never be too black when it comes to feeding Gray House appetites. Speaking of which, have you met my bodyguards?"

As if on cue, a pair of sinister, growl-filled waves broke onto the shore of Carolus Lampe, revealing the double Black presence that had remained hidden in plain sight only a few feet away. Mugs were spilled, and glasses shattered throughout the pub.

Lampe did his best not to flinch, but the sweat that broke upon his brow glowed in the tavern's weak lamplight. He tried in vain to push back, "Ione claims he can bottle the Black. While you have a pair, he could have an army."

Becks sighed. "Ione wet his pants in front of the entire court today, and his little demonstration of power was less than inspiring. Wouldn't you agree?"

Lampe had caught the scene from the far balcony, and its stark ending had been compelling. He chuckled, "Rhill thought you held the Gray Wind. Never has a boss so underplayed his hand."

Lampe was correct in his assessment, up to a point.

Becks had a broader, if not darker, view. "Never has a city so underestimated its peril."

"How so?"

"Tannoo somehow believes I front the Gray Prince." Becks gave Lampe a moment for this to sink in, adding, "But we both know that my brother is now far beyond the Gray."

"He's the Crown's Wind Catcher. He catches the Black," said Lampe.

“Yes, it’s what he does, and considering the power it would take to *catch* even one of the pair standing behind me, are you willing to pay for your mistake?”

While Lampe wielded a spear, Becks bore a dagger straight to the heart of the matter, keeping her brother at arm’s length, a specter in the room and nothing more, while her own guards opened the Gray boss’s eyes to Rebekah Na’am’s unrivaled position.

Carolus Lampe had lost his appetite. “I want my son’s body.”

Becks smiled. “That can be arranged.”

Chapter 19

Hollen Grail

The barking warned them before they'd ever made it through the gate. Drake slid from his horse and blocked the opening, catching Dagr as the wolfhound shot outward through the gap in the estate's wall. Rilo appeared, running with a broken leather lead as Drake rolled on the ground, pinning the snarling animal. Horses kicked and scattered around them.

Becks's escort of Recon troopers, the three hands from House Lampe, and their wagon were still strung out on the road snaking back down the hill. Becks had been bracing herself for the tirade that Petra Lampe, the boss's oldest daughter, would make as they reached the Hollen villa. The days on the central steppe had been cold, even freezing overnight. While this had helped to preserve Gavin Lampe's body as it hung outside her gate, the weeks had certainly taken their toll, leaving only a ragged husk that even Gavin's sister would struggle to recognize.

Becks almost thanked Dagr for the homecoming distraction as Rilo wrestled the dog back inside the villa's walls. Dagr, for its part, was plenty happy to see his owners but had become distracted by the sinister threat riding among them. The stranger didn't smell right, not at all, and could mean nothing but trouble for its family. Rilo managed to tie the hound securely to a post in the courtyard, allowing the loyal dog to watch the homecoming but not participate further.

"Dogs are considered a delicacy to eat in Niantia," said Careck.

Neither Becks nor Viren could decide whether the Nantine was kidding or not, and it had been that way the whole trip back from

Tannoo. To describe Careck as brooding would have been a wholly too human take. In some ways, Careck reminded Becks of her adopted brother, the two men almost being opposite sides of the same coin, but while Ara struggled with the madness and his humanity, Careck was unaware, unchanging, and bereft of emotion. He was only a mask bound to a demon. Any emotion, usually anger, was reflected in his eyes in the most hellish manner possible, but beyond that, he kept to himself as if waiting for permission to speak. The journey back from Tannoo had been uneventful, yet the inhuman presence of Careck had been more and more difficult for Raven, Viren, and Becks to endure with every passing day.

The Lampe wagon had halted outside, sticking to the business of cutting down their dead. The Recon troopers dismounted in the courtyard, greeting their section mates and handing off their horses as stable hands moved to corral the riled strays. From out of the villa's front door came a pair of young women, a message waiting on their lips.

It was into this scene that the demon suddenly charged. The First Fang's eyes melted into a fiery red pool as it bolted forward, drawing its weapons and shrieking, "Magata!"

Yseria shoved Cress sideways away from the door and dove left, rolling perpendicular to the attack as Careck's dagger plunged into the door's heavy, dark wood. This left the assassin standing in between the two women for an instant. As Careck retrieved the dagger, they drew their weapons. They'd both seen eyes like Careck's before and instantly knew the danger they faced.

Yseria wielded a two-handed black blade and pointed it, daring the man to step within its long reach as she slowly backed away. Cressida had drawn two fang-daggers, each larger than Careck's but a poor match for his broadsword. Careck took quick stock of his position and lunged at Cress, bringing both of his blades to bear. Cress was ready, exploding into a blur of blocks and counters, pressing to get inside his guard.

Raven drew Talon, moving to join the fight, but Viren Drake took hold of her arm, appraising the situation.

"Give her a chance," he said. "She needs this."

Raven halted her advance while Becks eyed her husband with skepticism. This wasn't like anything Becks had ever seen before, the bits she could see anyway, as two blurs, one gray, one black, tore into each other's guard. The unreal sounds of fangs striking fangs echoed sharply around the yard as a small group of onlookers peered through the front gate.

Raven had given them a count of fifty before she dashed in, screaming for them to hold. Cress had impressed everyone yet looked like she'd had more than enough. Careck spun at Raven's approach, trying to catch her cold. He lunged low, but Raven would have none of it, bringing *Talon* across his line of momentum and turning him enough to bring her claw-dagger into play. The short blade dug a thin line across his face and bit into his ear, grabbing all of the *Get's* attention.

Cress took advantage of the distraction, planting her own blade into the man's back shoulder and blocking his counterattack as Yseria and Andarion circled in to cover any avenues of escape.

"HOLD!" The voice of a veteran sergeant boomed across the yard as Viren Drake looked to gain control. In his hand, the taut lead of a large wolfhound, the beast ready to do its own damage to the Black presence. Drake could barely hold the dog back.

The four fighters shifted into defensive postures, and Careck, completely surrounded and dripping blood, did the same. The Nantine couldn't speak, only hissing with each hot breath until his eyes faded into an unsettled gray. Even then, nobody moved, each fighter's focus being on the next instant and the position of everyone's blades. Realizing the intolerable position, Careck dropped his weapons on the ground.

Viren barked an order, "Rilo! Take this dog!" His grip had been slipping. Dagr was a beast, a fervently loyal beast.

"Having a bit of trouble with your dogs?" Petra Lampe approached, not caring about the dangerous scene she'd witnessed. The Tannoo woman hadn't enjoyed the trip west, her attire and attitude had left much to be desired, and her pouty red lips smiled at the heaving chests around her.

"I wouldn't get too close," said Becks. "They're all still a bit keyed up and looking for a bone to chew."

“Who’s the wench? She looks familiar.” Petra pointed at Cress.

Careck hissed again, “Magata.”

The name froze Petra where she stood and stole the smile from her face. “Feth me,” she said.

“M—Maybe,” Careck hissed and hoisted a false grin. He wiped his bloody face on his shoulder as if preening for the act. There was nothing remotely human about it.

“Petra, please give my regards to your father,” said Becks. “Tell him that there is a good chance we will soon visit his cousin in Larkton.”

Carolus Lampe had agreed to a truce and would convey the same to his extended family in the northern provincial city of Larkton. Becks knew that information flowed fast between Houses and would certainly test him on it. If all went as planned, Rebekah Na’am’s life would become almost mundane, especially with the Gray Wind and Dagr here to protect her. The War of the Gray Prince was winding down in the East, and House Na’am had bolstered its claims, securing what it had lost only months before.

After seeing the Lampe contingent on their way down into the city and locking the villa’s steel gates, only then did they consider what to do with the Nantine assassin and what it meant for Cressida and Yseria to have arrived.

“Don’t waste my blood,” said Careck. Relieved of his weapons, he was tightly bound and shackled. He hadn’t fought them further.

Raven, Viren, and Becks needed to sort things out with Cress and Yseria. They had yet to look at the assassin’s wounds.

“Why not?” said Becks.

“For the reason that lone was so confident. I’d given him a small sample of my blood in exchange for safe passage and an audience with the Sovereign.”

“The doses of Black are made with your blood?”

“Not mine, per se, but the Damogir’s and the demon’s. *The Blood of the Get* is a mix of both. *Koki-Ten* makes a powerful weave, and the Realm of Niantia is in dire need of funds. The Gray Houses pay handsomely for power in a bottle. It is a fair exchange.”

“How do you know Cressida? What do you have against her?”

“Nothing, but *Koki-Ten* recognizes her condition. She is *magata*, a

barren one, an untouchable. Having failed to return to the Damogir, she doesn't deserve to live. May her heart remain empty."

In a few short sentences, the death-demon explained the curse of Cressida Magata. As an infant, she'd been sold for a fortune to the House of Rathven. Her whole life, she'd been treated as an untouchable possession by the Gray Houses of Tannoo, leaving her heart barren and empty, a void eager to accept the Black whenever it arrived.

"Your demon is wrong about that. My husband has already touched her plenty," said Raven. She had her own curse to conquer. Its name was Ara Storm.

"A man that I must meet."

"Why?"

Careck's eyes began to glow again, chasing away his eager smile. "A man that I must meet to end the Infernal contract of Niantia. The Damogir is trapped, having brought a plague upon the land."

"So, there really is a plague?" said Yseria.

"There has been a plague for more than a decade. It grows, fed by the people's suffering and the dark prince's greed."

"And the Horde?" said Yseria.

"You are well-informed for one so far removed. But you are only guessing, or you would know that there are two, one belonging to the contractor and one to the key."

"The Hell prince and the Damogir?" said Raven.

"Yes, and when I meet your husband. I will barter for two deaths."

"One of them better not be for Cress," said Yseria. "She is my sister and the Gray Wind that protects my brother's House. It's not her fault that she was sold off as a weapon in the making."

"You forget to whom you are speaking. I am such a weapon, sired by the Damogir and raised to be a weapon in his arsenal. I am what I am and nothing more. It is my duty to slay the woman as much as it is yours to stop me."

The bile rose in Raven's throat. "You're saying that Cressida was also bred to one day be a *Get of the Dam*. Wouldn't that make her your sister?"

"A half-sister of Careck." The Nantine's voice had taken on a strictly

alien tone. “The Black Prince’s appetite works through many in the city of Qreyl, though the strongest grow from the seed of the Damogir, and true siblinghood is only achieved through the Blood Challenge. The Emperor’s offspring aren’t allowed to flee the Realm, yet some few manage to escape or are sold into your barbaric Gray families. They fetch a rare price.”

The stark picture drawn by the death-demon silenced everyone, eliciting a deep laugh from the assassin’s gut. Its senses perceived the anxiety growing in the minds of those around it and drew an apt conclusion. “The man that I must meet, he has ascended solely through the challenge of blood, has he not? He is a brother and husband now, when before he was nothing. Nothing but *magata*.”

Becks was becoming sickened by the *Kjaira*’s hellish gaze and Raven’s rapt attention to its twisted tongue. While its insights provided clues to important questions, they didn’t provide any guidance on what to do with Careck and whether or not they should end him immediately. In her mind, his death would be a mercy and make their continent immensely safer.

“Andy, please stay here with Careck. If he tries anything, cut off his head.” Becks motioned the others into the manor house, leading them into the library in the back. “Yseria, Cress, why are you both here?”

Yseria nodded to Cressida, allowing the young woman to answer. It had been her idea, after all.

Cressida dealt with her shock at the sudden attack. She’d felt the truth in the demon’s words, had even experienced them once, and shuddered at the life she’d almost had. She had cursed her brother for saving her and giving her back the pain of *magata*. It was a curse of emptiness in every way, yet far better than the anathema that was Careck. She looked up, once again finding her mission.

“Ayla sent us a message. Somehow, Ara knows about the plague in Niantia, and he’s not waiting for the spring campaign. Laila thinks that his heart is broken and that he’s in no condition to face the threat alone.”

“Broken by whom?” said Raven, the pit in her stomach growing deeper. Her distant connection to Ara had faded away to almost nothing.

“Don’t look at me that way,” said Cress. She fought back her own tears, knowing exactly how Ara must feel. “It was that demon in the yard.”

Chapter 20

The Lockrun Connection

They'd come through the wrong gate, but it didn't matter. Unlike his name, Lazy knew better than to skimp on watchers or to ignore even the slightest chance of failure. He'd verified the target and felt satisfied that their prey was trapped, caught between a finite number of walls and gates.

The dark elves were the obvious sign, bodyguards like no other with their black swords and keen eyesight. The horse was wrong, but the man's eyes didn't lie. Haunting and haunted, they were the source of the mark's power, without a doubt.

"Like shooting fish in a barrel," Lazlo Franks murmured to his second, his mind focused on a single dangerous fish. "Just one more night, so stay focused."

"You're still thinking the west gate?" said the hand. He'd tired of the long watch in a hostile burg and did his best to envision the end of their hunt for the Gray Prince.

"Yes, but you'll have to cover the east one, just in case. You've got your killer dose. Use it if the target comes your way."

Cressida had remained in Hollen, the prodigal Gray Wind returned. A legend in the making, she'd grown up in the Tannoo House of Rathven. The Wind Catcher had bargained for her freedom and captured the beast that Rathven had bought to chain her. She knew how the Grays worked and was ready to help Becks settle any final challenges, once and for all.

As soon as House Rathven perished, Angus Rhill had been after

the Gray Wind, cutting a deal with House Na'am. He would meet her soon enough if he stepped out of line. In the meantime, with Drake's ornery wolfhound wrapped around her feet, Cressida would sit on the villa's chilly terrace under the weak winter sun and listen to the thump of a long-faded heart.

They'd left Careck bound, adding another pair of iron manacles from the Hollen jailer. The demon seemed pacified, but they weren't taking any chances. With wrists and elbows locked together, Careck could still steer his own mount and keep a decent pace as the four traveled northwest through the rolling Steppe. Neither the man nor demon ever complained.

A vigorous fortnight through the foothills and wild borderlands that separated Fugaku and Colivar had led the dark elves to the eastern gate of Lockrun late in the evening. The city on the northeastern frontier of Colivar was the home of Enricata Ramsey, a thirteen-year-old with deep brown hair, light hazel eyes, and coffee habit. The Vigil marks tattooed on her body tagged her as Vigil Enricata Moon, a member of Company Storm.

Raven was certain they were making a mistake by banging on the city gate, but they were exhausted and in dire need of connecting with the rest of Company Storm. She needed a break from the death-demon in their midst. "Don't say a word. Behave, and we'll be on the road by dawn."

It had been more than a week since they'd seen any sign of Careck, the man. His pale gray eyes had almost completely disappeared after they'd disarmed and bound the assassin in Hollen. It made their conversations impossible and left the group with a tainted silence that pushed them onward as fast as they could go.

A sentinel peered over the wall and signaled for the travelers to be let in. They couldn't leave Careck anywhere alone, not even in a jail cell, so they brought him to the Mayor's house on the town's square, looking for some relief.

Yseria went through the manor gate first to ensure their path was free of unguarded weapons and alert any company within. Raven tried not to worry about the night's foot traffic around the town square but

noted two watchers in the far corner, near the church. She would have never noticed them before, but her time in Hillsborn and Tannoo had opened her eyes to the mundane threats that seemed to follow the family of a Gray prince.

"Raven, please come in." The voice of Cat, Ara's long-time friend, called from the mansion's front door. "Company Moon is ready and waiting for you."

Yseria led Cat away from the entrance. Raven drew her claw-dagger, and Andy drew his black blade, allowing Careck's eyes to do the rest. Sentinels stepped back and drew their axes and shields, shepherding the prisoner into the Mayor's large meeting room. In the dim lamplight, Careck took on an even more sinister glow as he hunted about with his stare.

"Stop that!" Raven shouted and plunged her claw into his shoulder. She twisted it once as she pulled it out. Her revulsion of the creature had grown beyond her control.

"You forget who I am," said Careck, his inhuman voice cold and ignorant of any pain. "Don't waste your time."

"Raven, what have you brought us?" said Cat. She remained at the door to the room, unable to take a step closer to the unbroken fiend.

"Vigil Moon, Cat. I am sorry to bring such baggage as this. Careck is the last *Get of the Damogir*. The demon says that it wants to be free of its contract with the Damogir of Niantia and that it needs Ara's help to make that happen. The man beneath it is gone."

"Not gone, but chained and buried in place," said another. Hart Storm walked into the room, doing her best not to tremble at what she saw. "It knows what Ara has done to the rest. How can we trust it?"

Sevin Martell moved to stand in front of Hart. His axe gleamed in the ruddy lamplight, a ready challenge for the demon's glowing eyes. "Why does it still live?"

It was a simple question with a simple meaning, yet it sparked harsh memories to all that heard it.

The Paladins, Walker Grey and Cynan Black, came into the room, planting themselves between Careck and Cat. Grey had drawn his hellsword, a black metal broadsword with a pearlescent blade that could cut the Nantine assassin in half, given a chance.

Grey mumbled softly to his weapon before sharing its wisdom with the room. "Having helped kill the *Get* assassins, *Ber'yl* offers its condolences to Careck. Both of the assassin's souls want to be free, severed of the chains that bind them."

Hell-knights and *Kjaira* were diametrically opposed in the Infernal Domain, one having been bred for millennia to eliminate the other. It was the darkest of rivalries, and condolences between the two were clearly sarcastic in nature.

"How can we free them?" Raven was thinking as much about her own future sanity as she was about the vile nature of her travel companion.

"You can't," replied Grey. "They are woven together as one, but *Ber'yl* suggests using the Fang-dagger before it's too late. The soul of the death-demon is far too dangerous to ignore, even bound as it is."

The demon's alien voice seeped into their minds from everywhere around the room. "Your husband holds the other fang. It won't be enough without me."

Raven drew the assassin's fang, "I think *Ber'yl* has the right of it."

"Rae, stop," said Cat. She had taken a step into the room and looked all the more miserable for it. "Don't you see it?"

"See what?"

Cat took hold of Cynan's hand, ready to reveal her nightmare. "The man's eyes, the face, the broken smile. Careck is Ara's flesh and blood, his brother, chained to a *Kjaira*, to *Koki-Ten*."

Raven froze and looked around the room. The eyes of everyone stared, waiting for her decision. Juno Hartwell offered Raven a nod, letting her know that it was her call. She looked back at Careck, the man's eyes fading to gray for an instant, a demonic blink, and Raven knew she couldn't do it. She chose to see the man, not the weapon.

Cat handed Raven yet another fang-dagger, this one called *Sorrow*. "For Ara," she whispered.

Raven coughed, caught between the dueling visions of two broken men, unsure if she could do what was needed to save either. She put her weapons away and hugged the young Vigil. "Cat, did you say, '*Company Moon*'?"

Most of Raven's night was spent catching up with Ara's former company. Careck remained bound with ropes and iron. With a serious guard of Paladins and sentinels, it had been taken to the nearby city jail, where it spent a quiet night bolted to the wall.

Cat was jittery, suffering a lack of sleep according to Cynan, and had been keeping a careful distance from her new inquisitor. Cat's ability to see the demonic incursions before they arrived through the Veil had given her the mantle of Vigil Moon and the authority to do whatever it took to protect the Realm of Colivar. To her, that meant turning her back on her life-long friend and the insightful help that he'd sent. The Nantine plague was real, and its reach was deadly to the most sensitive eyes, including those of Hart Storm.

Cat enjoyed her newfound company and trained with them every day. Whenever things in her head got too heavy, she latched onto Cynan or took a long ride with Walker Grey. Unable to cope with what she'd seen in Ara's heart or in his future, she had run home to Lockrun with her Paladins. Now, Cat could barely bring herself to look at the assassin Careck, the man's face a twisted reminder of chains made to be broken.

Cat's father, Lord-Mayor Ramsey, was more than happy to have his daughter at home, even if the nights were becoming rough on everyone. Word had already been sent to Berykholt and Vigil Snow, offering a dire warning ahead of the spring campaign.

With a growing host of sentinels in Lockrun, the Mayor didn't mind that Ara Storm was nowhere to be seen, but the arrival of Raven Ylamil had been a shock. She looked as fierce as her husband and almost as undone as her Nantine prisoner. Mayor Ramsey was almost glad to see the dark elves ride off just after dawn, heading for the west gate by way of the city jail.

"Is it time to eat?" said Careck, eyeing Walker Grey astride his own horse. Careck's shoulder had healed a week's worth in the ten hours they'd shackled him into the jail cell.

"We'll eat on the road. We've got a long way to go and finally a clear road ahead to get us there," said Raven. Sickened by the previous evening's revelations, she was doing her best to look anywhere but at the demon's horribly familiar face.

They'd covered Careck's arms with a blanket, hiding the manacles and the knot of ropes that bound his arms tightly together. They didn't need any extra attention as they slipped out the western gate in the low morning light. Traders and wagons were already rolling out ahead of them, looking to get a strong start as well, while other caravans lined up outside the walls, still getting organized.

As their small group cleared the town gate, Careck stiffened in his saddle, and a low vibration shook everyone around him. His arms flashed up, catching a steel bolt as it flew towards his chest. Instead of piercing his poorly used heart, the dart lodged in his forearm, severing the rope that bound his arms together. The assassin rolled from his saddle and disappeared.

The dark elves dismounted and scattered with blades drawn, looking to circle a group of wagons nearby. Walker Grey planted himself at the open gate with shield and broadsword at the ready.

Careck reappeared among a line of wagons on the right, frantically wielding a saber that came from who knows where. The rope had fallen off, but his manacles were still in place, forcing the assassin to dance with a single weapon as he carved his way through a half dozen men. Only one assailant managed to put up a fight, and even that didn't last more than a dozen heartbeats. Teamsters and traders ran in every direction to escape the sudden melee.

A crossbow lay on the ground at the assassin's feet, along with six bodies; not all of them had been armed. The steel bolt remained firmly embedded in Careck's arm, and the demon's eyes glowed a hellish red in the dim, dawn light, searching for their next opponent.

"Hold!" Raven advanced with *Talon* in hand, flanked by Yseria and Andarion.

Careck's right arm was dangling, weighing down his saber-wielding left via the short iron chain connecting the manacles. The assassin circled right, using the wagons to hinder the dark elves, and ducked out of sight. A moment later, he vaulted onto the back of a heavy cart and leaped outward into their midst. His right thumb had been sheared away, freeing his right hand from its manacle and allowing his left to move more freely.

Raven met him before his feet could touch the turf. Her black sword

drove him backward onto the ground, where he rolled into a crouch, scanning everywhere at once.

Raven caught his desperate look. “Yser, get back with Grey and guard the gate.”

The *Kjaira*’s eyes flickered, losing some of their reddish luster. “You’re using the wrong weapon. A common blade won’t hold me.”

“What’s wrong with your arm?” Raven prodded the beast before her.

“Poison on the bolt,” the assassin’s voice trembled, sounding almost human. “Curse the doting of a King—we could have been husband and wife.”

“You were already wed to a devil.” Raven inched closer, burning the memory of the man’s familiar eyes into her skull.

“And yet, so are you.” Careck swallowed his acidic tone, gaining his feet. He laughed hard until he staggered and lunged.

Part 3

Northern Gates

Chapter 21

The Gulf of Breen

The northern dukes needed to be warned, and a Gray war finished. Company Storm arrived in the industrious coastal city of Hampport, the domain of the Duke of Breen and his Gray counterpart, Boss Wheeler. I'd met neither, relying on my station and my impressively martial escort for the attention of the former while sorting my options for approaching the latter. Hidden somewhere within the city was a connection to Niantia, and I planned on finding it.

We crossed over the Shetland River Bridge, the largest span in the Kingdom. We circled through the city, drawing plenty of attention as we inspected the broad districts that elbowed each other within Colivar's largest port. Dozens of busy docks and piers adorned a small thumb of water that poked the city, allowing the unending flow of goods, from the exotic to the ham-hocked, and proving that ours wasn't the only continent or coast in the world.

Collaring the Portside District, the Warehouse, Market, and Merchant sections extended for more than a mile inland, reaching toward the wooded bluffs of the Magistrates, the Landed, and the Duke. In between were the Slopes, the zone that mixed business with pleasure and provided a gate to the Lower Districts of Hampport. The more modest citizens lived on the Shetland River's southside, commuting via the many local bridges and ferries. Major livestock pens were also stocked and managed south of the river, on the far edge of the city in an attempt to ease the odiferous nature of their inhabitants and align with the caravans and drovers heading inland, south and east.

We had only scouted through town for an hour before we'd gathered a watcher or two, and a section of mounted, red-clad guardsmen had appeared in our path. The Order's sentinels wore gray tabards with a white eye within a sun badge on their breast. The Paladins wore the symbol on their massive shields strung across their backs. As a group, we were easily identified and impossible to ignore. Not having reached our final destination for the day, it was with some relief that we were accosted in the fading afternoon.

"Are you demon-hunting in Hampport or simply lost?" said the officer of the Guard. He'd failed to make an introduction, and it would cost him.

After a few moments of silence, I turned to Sealy Lankes, saddled to my right. "Paladin Lankes, aren't you going to answer the trooper?"

The guard officer blushed at the word 'trooper' and our nonchalant manner. We were coated with a dusting of city and road, a poor reflection in his burnished steel chest plate. Jillian's two steel-clad bodyguards rode forward to flank us, forming an impressively menacing front. I sat quietly among them, meek and ignored, enjoying life with the vaunted, barrel-chested Brotherhood.

Lankes took some time to clear his throat and spit on the cobbles beside the Ducal Guard officer's mount. "We're Vigil Company Storm, and who might you be?"

The city square around us, one of many scattered throughout the city, seemed to slow its pace at Seely's overloud declaration, and more than a few on-lookers were enjoying the growing spectacle.

The officer looked down at his boot, checking for offense before answering, "I am *Captain* Bassett of the Duke's Horse Guards."

"A captain of the Duke's Horse?" said Lankes.

"Horse Guards."

"You guard the Duke's horses, Captain?"

Captain Bassett rued the fact that he'd ever approached our little column of belligerence. "Paladin, where is your captain?"

Lankes looked at me. I shook my head and shrugged.

"We don't have one," he replied, giving me a pang of regret.

I missed having Juno Hartwell around to avoid scenes like the one we were in. Captain Hartwell would frown on it mightily and shun it in

every way.

“And what are you doing in Hamport, Paladin?”

“Visiting the Duke of Breen.” Seely might as well have spit on the man’s horse for the reaction he got.

Captain Bassett had been growing more and more agitated at the bent conversation, and knowing that he must bring it to the duke’s attention had soured his mood. He frowned at Lankes, and fifty razor-sharp axes glared back, peering gently across my sentinel’s shoulders as our column remained motionless. Ben Heck would be frowning by now, too.

I reached out with my senses, my mind running forward down the line of Horse Guards, finding little ire and plenty of delight at Bassett’s obvious frustration. My focus swung wide around the city square and skidded on a patch of Black ice, a crossbowman taking aim from atop a market roof less than forty yards away.

I spun my horse counterclockwise in place, casually glancing across the square as I did, and spoke quietly to Acker Lorde, “*Shields up.*”

With my back to Captain Bassett, I steered into Jillian Stone’s horse, pushing her aside as Lorde barked out the order to our column. Fifty steel shields appeared like a scratched and dented wall facing the Horse Guards and the square.

“Keep moving up and down the column, but stay behind our shields,” I told Jillian.

It was times like these that I missed having *Sorrow* around but would have to sort things with *Koki-Ten* instead. Steering back toward the guard captain, I halted between my bodyguards and nodded, doing my best not to lean into the shadow of Lorde’s shield.

Captain Bassett seemed confused by our column’s suddenly defensive maneuver, and his troop was becoming decidedly nervous at the escalating standoff.

Holding myself in place, I drew my fang-dagger and waited, focusing to my left while scanning for more cold threats. Perceiving only a single assassin at a moderate distance, I figured we could risk it. Ben Heck deployed crossbowmen by habit across the rooftops in the Garden of the King neighborhood in Maidenhall. They were a lethal security measure and a well-placed eye on the district. I couldn’t begin

to guess at how Boss Wheeler used his but assumed the worst.

The day was clear, the wind as cool and calm as my men, and the afternoon light was slowly fading. Across the square, above the market, the icy concentration became one of mirth, and I could hear a hissing laughter echo in my mind as the weapon shifted and released. I almost fell off my horse.

Less than an arm's length to my left, Acker Lorde's stout shield caught the incoming bolt on its upper edge and deflected the missile skyward in a flash. The sudden, intense crack, like a whip, spooked all of the nearby horses, causing many on both sides to jump. The steel missile arced and tumbled high over our heads. Almost without thinking, I leaned back and reached out, snagging the deformed projectile from the air as it fell, its purpose and momentum well spent. Lankes spun back and reached for my jacket, saving me from an embarrassing face-plant into the cobbles below.

Across the square, the icy black disappeared, but plenty of watchers remained, and in my hand sat a great conversation starter if not the key to Boss Wheeler.

I nodded my thanks at Lankes and looked up the long hill on our right. We needed to get moving.

Lankes burped, "Now, Captain, would you lead us to the Duke of Hamport."

"Breen," said the Guard captain. He sighed at the Paladin's blank stare. "Never mind. Just follow me."

Hamport was flush; the Duke of Breen and Boss Wheeler each ruled one of the richest domains outside of Maidenhall. Within the duke's high walls, the guest keep was large enough to house our entire company. The steward, an energetic man named Greve, led a small army of servants, directing us all to various floors and rooms. The sentinels filled the first two floors, the paladins got the third, and you can guess who got the fourth for himself, his inquisitor, and their spirited bodyguards. It was a simple case of divide and conquer, and after three days on the road, it worked.

Fresh out of the bath, I was confronted by the ducal tailor holding various garments to wear to dinner with the duke that evening.

Standing in my short clothes and smelling of rose water, I offered the tailor's crew a model of Vigil resolve. It was enough to drain the blood from their faces.

"Start here," I suggested, handing them my black leather riding jacket. Offering slots to sheathe my daggers, it was reinforced with an inner mesh of fine chain and coarse leather. It was a garment suitable for every occasion in my life.

The tailor lifted it gingerly. "Fine work. Maidenhall, is it?"

I was impressed by the man's assessment. "How could you tell?"

"Like any competent tailor, it has a tag sewn into the collar. I recognize a fellow apprentice, though one drawn to the lower end of society."

"Should I remind him of you if I ever return to Maidenhall?"

After showing a puzzled look, he said, "That would be kind. Tell him that Master Cade offers his condolences. He'll know what it means."

"Master Cade, it would be a pleasure. Will you be able to do something with my bodyguards for tonight's dinner? I'd rather have them with me, armed. They are Paladins of the Order and should be honored as such."

"The Duke has his own Knight-Guards, and we've had plenty of experience crafting their attire. Now, before my assistants faint, let's get you properly covered for the occasion."

Lord Anton Chase, the Duke of Breen, was an expert on the Kingdom's trade and the comings and goings of everything. While the Duke of Stonnberg was in charge of our realm's defense along the entire northern border, the Duke of Breen seemed to have little demands other than to oversee the port, collect the taxes, and defend his narrow coastal domain. He funded a small navy to patrol for smugglers, reavers, and unsanctioned landings and, as dukes go, lived a fairly sheltered life. I hated to spoil his dinner.

The long table was stocked with dignitaries and friends of Duke Chase. Four Paladins were casually placed among them, each with a strikingly beautiful lady sitting within arm's reach to guarantee their best behavior. The placement showed insight and planning, giving me a clue to the evening's charming hosts.

I sat to the Duke's right. Lady Breen was on his left, directly across from me, and Jillian Stone sat to my right. Duke Chase was in his fifties with salt-and-pepper hair, a short mustache, and once-broad shoulders. He'd inherited the seat of Hampport and had done plenty in his youth to secure it for his family. Lady Breen was in her late thirties, a blonde beauty, and difficult to avoid. Her blue eyes seemed to never leave mine as we spent time introducing ourselves.

In my discomfort, I caught myself reaching under the table for the hand of Jillian Stone and ended up blushing furiously at my near mistake. It was a habit hard to break. Instead, I placed my hand on the table beside hers and let Jill decide when she would need it. The quiet young woman seemed to be enjoying the elegance of the dinner scene, the fine dress that she wore, and the attention being shown by everyone around us. Westlake had its rustic spot in the realm, but the major cities offered an urban setting and wealth that Jillian had never experienced.

"Vigil Storm, I was told that you had some difficulty this afternoon in the Upper Market Square. My guard captain was quite distraught about it."

I carried the bent bolt, still warm in my pocket.

I smiled. "Not as distraught as your tailor when he saw Paladin Lankes, I'd imagine, but there was a bit of a misunderstanding today, Hampport versus Breen and all that."

Duke Chase relaxed, obviously having heard a far harsher account. His wife shook her head almost imperceptibly, and her gaze hardened in the Dining Hall's flickering lamplight. She was probably her husband's teller, having a rare *clear sight* ability to see the truth in another's words.

"Duke, thank you for the dinner invitation. Has it been long since you've hosted a Vigil of the Order?"

"It's been over five years, the last having some trouble in our city."

"Lord Snow?"

"No, Lord Stone. My apologies for bringing it up. It was a sad affair."

Jillian Stone became like a statue at my side, stoic and still, her emotions entombed beneath the surface of her mind, waiting to be let out. Her hand rested gently on mine.

I changed the subject, “Duke, I am quite curious about the port’s connections and whether or not any goods still arrive from Niantia.”

“Niantia? Niantia has a reputation for its isolation, and in my opinion, its lack of commerce has impoverished that realm terribly. We rarely see traders coming down the coast, and when they do, they seem to be carrying little of value. They buy only the cheapest of grains and goods to take back.”

“Lord Chase, has anyone you know recently traveled up the coast to Niantia?”

“Not for years. As I said, it’s not profitable, and the northern seas can be treacherous. The few Nantine traders of late share news of a plague, trying to drive a better bargain, no doubt, and further spoiling any appetites for routes northward. Why the interest in Niantia?”

“That is a conversation best held after dinner, but I do have something that I can show you in that regard.” Reaching into my pocket, I also reached out around the room, gently pulling on everyone’s attention. I held up a small vial of Black, the substance swallowing the light around it. “Does anyone here know the source of this liquid?”

Lady Breen asked first, “Does it relate to your role within the Order?”

“Yes, and it’s rumored to come from Niantia.”

“What is it?” she asked.

I felt like I was being interrogated in the most pleasant of ways. I didn’t fight it.

“A stimulant made from the blood of a demon.” The word *demon* sparked more than its share of surprised gasps around the table. Out of the corner of my eye, Lankes comforted the young lady to his left, assuring her that the demon was probably long dead and that he’d protect her anyway. I liked his style.

Lord Chase seemed perplexed, leaning in as if I knew a competitor’s secret recipe. “How could one extract the blood of a demon?”

“I have some ideas, but nothing is known for sure.”

Lady Breen’s curiosity hadn’t abated. “What does this elixir do?”

“Whoever drinks it will have a temporary yet extraordinary boost to

their senses, their eyesight, reflexes, and strength. It is quite a boon for an assassin or a marksman positioned on a busy market square.”

“Priceless,” said Lord Chase.

Everything came with a price, but I didn't know what it would be.

Lady Breen's eyes glanced at her husband's and locked back on mine, a seductive predator coming to the fore. She smiled, “Lord Storm, never have we had such stimulating dinner conversation.”

I sincerely hoped we'd make it through dessert.

Chapter 22

Night Work

Given enough time, I might have stayed longer. Lord Chase and his attentive wife were both genuinely charming throughout the evening and seemed to take well-practiced turns to gently prod us for information. Their city was their business, and I had a concern that might bankrupt everything.

Jillian Stone remained at my side throughout, sitting close when we all retreated to the duke's library for a private briefing on the perceived threat in the north. She seemed enamored by Lady Chase and perhaps a little jealous. The dinner's fine wine had stirred my young inquisitor's broken thoughts more than a bit, and it was getting late.

Rumors sifting up through the port of a Nantine plague were all the confirmation I needed on the matter. I dove in arm first once the Duke and Lady Breen were settled on the couch across from us.

"Lord and Lady Chase, we thank you for your hospitality and attention. I may spend a few days in your city before traveling on, but I'd like to warn you about a threat to the Realm of Colivar, one that is looming beyond our northern border. The rumors that you have heard about a plague are almost certainly true, and by reason, it stands that the Realm of Niantia is in dire straits."

"What does this Nantine plague have to do with Colivar or the Order of the Vigil?" said Lord Chase.

I removed my jacket. "Plagues can take different forms. Some of this world, and some not."

Jillian helped me unbuckle the leather brace that adorned and protected my left forearm. Most times, when I wasn't asleep or dining

with a Lord, it would be covered by a heavy steel vambrace which acted like a shield when used at night-stalker speeds.

“Lord Chase, have you met Vigil Snow?”

“Yes. A pleasant and powerful fellow, I’d say.”

“That he is, and certainly needed. If you were to have this conversation with him and asked him the same about me, you’d probably get a vastly different answer.”

Lifting off the last strap of my brace, I grinned and bared my mangled arm to the Lord and Lady. “This is a symptom of a plague, an Infernal plague, one that I believe ravages the Realm of Niantia, but from time to time spills over into our Kingdom. The damage you see is from a death-demon, an Infernal assassin known as a *Kjaira*.”

Lady Breen looked a bit green, perhaps having too much wine, but she still followed my words without fail. “For several years, we’ve heard rumors of a plague there. Why has it not burned itself out? Or why has it not spread to our cities?”

It had been working to do just that, and I had the scars, both physical and mental, to prove it.

“I might ask my inquisitor to answer that. Believe it or not, her presence here with me is another symptom of the same plague. Her father is Vigil Stone of Westlake, and her mother was his inquisitor before suddenly dying five years ago.”

I looped my left arm around the waist of Jillian Stone, letting the blush of her anger crest before it gave way to shame and sadness again. She knew without a doubt what had killed her mother.

I whispered in her ear, “I’m sorry.”

Jillian took a moment to find herself and nodded.

As gently as possible, I continued, “Lord Stone has a gift that allows him to see farther than any other Vigil. A gift or a curse, it keeps him backed into a far corner of the realm, safe within the walls of rural Westlake and far out of reach of Niantia.

“Last week, I brought word of the plague to Westlake, and in doing so, almost killed both the Vigil and his daughter. Such is the power of the Pestilence that even a glimpse of it can harm those who are most sensitive. Be assured I will not mention it in more detail here, for the sake of those that share a clearer sight.”

Lady Breen looked at the table between us, suddenly anxious. "You almost killed this young lady?"

"Almost. Jillian has yet to recover, but she will, fully. I won't leave her side until I'm sure she is well enough. That much is owed."

My arm remained where it was, wrapped around my inquisitor's waist. Her head tilted onto my shoulder; the dinner's wine had taken its toll.

"Lord Storm, I dare say, telling her that will only stifle her recovery."

"But not her insight, nor yours, Lady Breen." I was well aware of the state of things but saw no other option as I coaxed the curse from Jillian's mind.

"And when she is whole? It sounds like you plan on leaving her."

"You've seen my arm and my inquisitor's heart. Which one would you rather have here in Hampport?"

Lord Chase leaned forward. "You're offering us your inquisitor or your company?"

"I'm offering you both until I return, and maybe afterward, assuming you have the room and that we all survive."

I was an optimist. Who knew?

"Why not just leave Niantia alone? They haven't bothered us yet."

Somehow the Duke of Breen had already forgotten the state of my arm, but Lady Breen had seen it, and she would remind her husband later, I was sure.

"Lord Chase, the plague will only continue to grow, and it may reach a point where it is unstoppable. The passes that lock the Nantine's Hordes north of the Everest Range are already being tested. We must prepare for the time when Niantia unleashes its Horde upon the whole continent."

"Lord Storm, tonight was a most pleasant dinner, but the dessert has certainly turned sour. In light of the coming threat, I accept your company's presence and will sponsor their stay. In the meantime, where will you be? Niantia?"

"Yes. Winter is receding, and commitments have been made. As soon as I finish putting certain affairs in order, I will be heading north."

"Affairs such as Jillian Stone," said Lady Breen. She smiled, but her eyes no longer met mine, nor anyone's the rest of the evening, and I

found myself admiring the wife of the Duke of Breen very much.

The sun was barely up when I knocked on Jillian's door. Mornings were always the best, the time when Jillian was most rested and mostly herself. As the day wore on, she would fade, becoming more and more withdrawn, so I figured we'd better get an early start.

As an inquisitor of the highest caliber, she was too valuable to leave in such a broken state, especially when she might be needed most. I'd already fitted her wrist with a blood-soaked strap, feeding energy through a crude bond as a form of healing for her heart, but the damage done wasn't in her heart or soul but rather her mind. She'd experienced the Infernal plague in the same way her mother had years before and been plunged into its chaotic grasp. Thankfully, my physical touch seemed to work, giving us a connection that calmed the chaotic vibrations and brushed away the scars, the painful strands sticking like cobwebs in her head.

My life depended on the touch of an inquisitor, the unseen hand that brought me back whenever the Black took hold of my mind. Hart had saved me on more than one occasion, and it cost her every time, scourging her body and soul. She'd become afraid of me, afraid of my touch, even when I was healthy, which was, I must admit, less and less often. She knew what she was missing, and to her, the good paled in comparison to the bad.

Jillian Stone was no longer a virgin when it came to feeling the touch of the Infernal, and perhaps it would save her in the long run. All that mattered was that she fully returned and became well enough to heal her father. To leave the world in its finest form had become my near-term goal, and that left us standing on a cold pier, feeling the cold wind careen across the steel-gray Bay of Breen.

The ship was named 'the Dove.' It had arrived weeks before, and its meager crew worked to secure cargo on its spacious decks. The captain barked orders to the crew as they readied to catch the outgoing tide. The hold was full, and the Hamport Harbormaster was checking that all was in order before releasing the brigantine.

Letting go of Jillian's cold hand, I strode up the gangway and hopped on board as if I owned the vessel. It wouldn't take a lot to

make that a reality. “Harbormaster, I am Lord Storm, and I’ve just come from the Duke’s Hold. What seems to be the hold up here?”

I stood a touch closer to the man than necessary, forcing him to look me in the eye before he could answer.

“Just waiting on a final inspection. It might be completed today.” The magistrate knew his business and the coin he’d receive if he delayed things long enough.

I scanned the Harbormaster’s list and waved the captain over, “Sir, where is your plague flag? And why are the locals intermingling with your crew?”

“Plague?” said the Harbormaster. “We weren’t informed.” The man checked his list again as if that information might suddenly appear.

The paper showed all the goods being claimed and the names of all hands being present upon arrival and departure but lacked any awareness of the crew’s condition or a plague risk.

A quick sniff told me the ship was clean of any Pestilent presence, but I wrinkled my nose anyway. “And yet you’d take the coin straight from this man’s diseased hand? I will have to inform Lord Breen. We may have to close the harbor if you don’t clear them out of here immediately.”

The Harbormaster tossed the captain a green flag and headed for the off-ramp, calling for his inspection crew to follow. “We’ve seen enough. Good day.”

The captain smiled, “I thought he’d never leave. It had been three days with him visiting our deck, waiting on his cut. We’d paid the docking fees and used the last of our coin on medical supplies.” The man was anxious, expecting yet another shakedown, or worse, from the heavily armed stranger standing on his deck.

I reached out to shake his hand. “I’m Lord Storm from the Order of the Vigil.”

The man was untainted, not a hint of Black to go along with his hidden guilt. “I’m Captain Slack.”

“You’re cutting things a bit close, aren’t you, Captain?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, when the local boss finds out your delivery wasn’t as

potent as expected, he's gonna be far less than pleased. I'm surprised he hasn't burned your ship already."

I'd hit the man's nightmare square.

The blonde-bearded captain quaked. "What do you mean?"

Reaching into my pack, I withdrew one of the vials of Black and shook it gently. "How many did you bring this time?"

"A dozen, the last of it, they said."

"What's your next port of call?"

"Sanctuary Bay on the Nantine coast."

"I've never heard of 'Sanctuary.' Is that a city?"

"The city is called Kelton. Now it's the only place left to land on the west coast, and the way things look, it will be the next to fall. There are only a few cities left in Niantia."

I replaced the vial in my pack. "Captain, every ship needs one safe port. I can see it's time for you to sail, but if you tell me where I can find your local contact, I'll be glad to square things for you after you've gone."

It was hard to see them drift away from the dock. I ached to be onboard, sailing north. Still, the fine form of Jillian Stone waited for me on the pier, shivering now, and I didn't trust my bodyguards to restore her sanity, especially not after yesterday's encounter with Captain Bassett of the Horse Guards. At least I had a new agreement and the name of a warm spot for lunch.

Chapter 23

The Collection

The Rusty Bucket was, at first glance, a suitable moniker for the busy tavern. Located in a cellar in the Merchant District, it was more a smuggler's dream than a pub, and I could only imagine the hallways and dark tunnels that ran from the basement of that old building. By the smell, there had to be at least one less than sanitary passage and a few that opened near the docks. Staleness was everywhere.

Our four bodyguards had gone back to the Duke's Hold. We didn't need the extra attention as we traipsed down the stairs and through the pub's heavy oak door. A steel bar leaned against the wall, gathering dust, and a large fireplace in the far corner pushed heat and excess smoke into the room.

Having loitered outside and noting little traffic before going in, we were surprised to see a room with only a few empty tables to spare, a kitchen in full swing, and a long counter, supported by barrels, seating a dozen heavily armed men. We took the nearest open table, not wanting to appear picky or concerned. Besides a few serving girls, Jill was the only female in the room.

"Put your hand on mine," I whispered. "And tell me what you see."

"Is it safe?" she asked.

"It's safe to look."

"What happened to you in Bridgeton?"

The table in the back corner was empty. There'd been four men sitting there when we came in.

"What do you mean?" I said. I drew my fang-dagger with my free hand and spun it absently, even as I searched for threats behind

hidden doors and walls. There were plenty, though most ignored us.

"We'd met the mayor, and you were fine, but by the following morning, you were different. It's like you're bleeding energy through the soles of your feet."

"At the bar, second and third from the left," I said. "They carry a residue of corruption, and the people here are on edge. They won't even dare to look at us. How could they know?"

"We're in their basement. Maybe they don't want strangers here."

They hadn't barred the door. It made no sense to me.

A young barmaid approached, a pale girl, overly thin, sporting rosy, wind-burned cheeks and reeking of woodsmoke and stale sweat. "Are you here for lunch?"

"Yes, but my friend would like to know if the food here is as good as it is up the coast in Kelton."

If I'd pinched her, she might have given me the same reaction. "You've never been there, or you wouldn't have asked that."

"No, but I'm thinking of going for a visit. Any suggestions?"

"Yes, don't." The serving girl kept her chin down, hiding her eyes and her tears hidden behind a bank of poorly cropped, sand-colored hair.

It had been far too soon.

"What's your name?"

She seemed to think about it as if I'd asked her to name a childhood friend, long dead. "Jae."

"Jae, how much did it cost for you to come here?"

Jae was young, maybe eleven or twelve, and had become an orphan like me. She'd abandoned her family, or maybe they'd abandoned her. I didn't ask. She was unchained from life in the most grievous of ways with no going back.

"Everything," she replied.

Her grief floored me.

I wondered if her feet bled energy, too, as I slid a gold mark across the table. "For lunch and a chat with the boss if he's around."

"Keep it. They'll only take it from me, and the food here's not that good."

I put the coin away and removed a sharp, slightly bent, barbed

piece of metal. "Take this instead."

"What is it?"

"A key."

"To what?"

"To Hamport. Don't lose it."

Lunch was edible and warm. Well, mostly warm and tasting of pig's blood when I thought to notice. The initial anxiety in the pub had settled a bit, as if everyone, including us, had gotten used to our presence. Bad food will do that but don't ask me how.

"I'll find us someplace better for dinner, I promise." Jill was still going strong yet continued to lean on my arm.

"Remember this place, this taste, this time," I said. "Lock it in your head, the menace and the receding buzz toward normalcy, and recall it every night when you go to bed. Give it a name if you have to, and talk to it, but don't forget it. Carry it for both of us."

I could feel her heart speed up, not out of fear, but something else, a cliff in the distance, perhaps, overlooking a canyon of anticipation and doubt. It was safe to look, but not leap, not with me.

"I will call it 'Woe,'" she said, sharing what we both felt of the scene, mostly warm, with the door unbarred.

"I have no second but will sort that before I go, and, as my inquisitor, you will stay out of the fight. Let the Paladins earn their keep."

Jill nodded, staring. "How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"You've shut it off, the bleed. I don't see it anymore."

"It's what I do." *Or maybe it was my other half, the purveyor of Black energy not letting any go to waste.*

Wearing a dark goatee and intense brown eyes, an elegantly dressed man of middle age pulled up a chair right across from me. The years hadn't been kind, and neither had he. Wheeler was unarmed, except for the damaged crossbow bolt that he'd placed on the table and the six hard-looking men that took over the bar counter behind him. Each enforcer sang a dark tune in my head while the boss remained silent.

Seeing the corruption arrayed before us, Jillian gripped my left arm and slid her chair closer.

I held up my right hand and slowly drew *Koki-Ten* from behind my back, placing it flat on the table in front of me without threat. The death-demon was wide awake, hissing with laughter in my head, matching the music being played. It had decided to sing along.

"I thought you'd be harder to find," said Wheeler.

It was almost a complaint. The boss didn't like being wrong about anything. It only took one small mistake, and he could be lying dead on a tavern floor somewhere.

Instead of hiding out in Maidenhall, I'd come straight to his door to make my demands, forcing him to respond. Wheeler had been wrong from the beginning and was about to pay for it. Sometimes, the easiest way to kill a spider is to sit in its web holding an even blacker spider, one that can cut and weave stronger strands.

"We've never met," I said.

"I thought for sure you'd get on that ship this morning and set sail for safer shores."

If wishes were horses.

"Where's your second?" I said. "He should be here in case he objects."

"Objects to what?"

"Our agreement."

Ignoring me, Wheeler pointed his bent bolt at Jill. "Who's she?"

"She's the one person stopping me from killing everyone else in this room."

Wheeler's eyes never left mine. He saw the truth, even as it cackled in my head.

"Now?" hissed *Koki-Ten*.

"Not yet," I thought, nudging the eager demon back from its appointed task.

The men at the bar shuffled a bit, trying to get comfortable and calculating their first moves.

"Hamport or Breen?" I said, tapping my dagger on the table like an ice pick, hoping to break the tension.

"Hamport," Wheeler scoffed.

Common ground arrived with iron on its breath.

"Did you ever meet Boss Sarpa?" I said.

Wheeler shook his head, hiding his anger at the mention of his old rival and the fear it still elicited.

"They used the Black arts to attract a dangerous, diseased backer, and they'd even killed the Vigil of Maidenhall to allow their schemes to grow."

"What's that got to do with anything? Hamport is my city. Feth your Gray crown and feth Maidenhall."

Wheeler didn't know me at all. His supply of Black doses was running thin.

"The first one on the left," I thought. *"Give him to me."*

On the count of four, I looked over Wheeler's shoulder. "Get me the boss's second, now."

The chosen enforcer turned and left the room, leaving five staring at the boss's back and the boss staring back at us, puzzled.

"What if I told you that Sarpa was still alive? And that his deals had gotten him deeper into bed with the devils?"

"What's that got to do with me?" Fear had begun to sprout in his mind.

I pulled on it gently. I glanced at the broken dart in his hand. "You're following his script, taking a shot at every Vigil that rides into town."

Wheeler's second entered, following the tainted enforcer. It took him only a moment to figure out what was going on. He took a seat to my right. "I'm Gaines."

"Boss Wheeler and I were just reminiscing and deciding whether we had an agreement or not. I've recently found out that his supply of Black power has reached its end."

"How's that? We received another shipment this week," said Gaines.

"Have you tried it out? You might find that the doses are a bit weaker than you expected. Also, their source is dead and gone. It's the last batch that you'll ever get."

"How do you know that?" said Wheeler.

I slowly opened my travel pack and scooped out a handful of my weaker brew, spreading a dozen vials on the table.

The men around me almost drooled, and I suddenly realized the Black addiction that came with the curse. I should have known. *Koki-Ten* had lied by omission.

"My soul is like a hook. Once swallowed, the fish are mine," my death-demon came clean. *"Only you managed to escape."*

"Try one, on me, or better yet, try one of your own, one of the most recent vintage, if you don't believe my word." I knew that he did. "And then give me your best shot. Feth, they can all join in too."

Another twelve hands were seated around the room. Wheeler looked at Gaines and the dozen Black doses calling to him. Which one would jump? Surprisingly, Wheeler reached the edge first, pulling out his own private bottle, and I handed out the rest to the first dozen that reached our table.

My eyes began watering at the caustic screaming in my head as *Koki-Ten* burrowed into the hearts and minds of almost twenty men.

My right hand swung down, pinning Gaines's left hand to the table with *Koki-Ten*. "You get to call the winner," I said. *"Now."*

Wheeler had taken a full power dose, matching those at the bar. He jumped up and spun as a bottle smashed against his head. Shaking it off, he dove into the middle of his six enforcers. The other dozen scattered about us, going after whoever was still standing in the room and tearing into each other. For the entire fight, my right hand remained on the fang-dagger implanted in the table, and my left was draped across the shoulders of Jillian Stone.

The room had become a storm, a chaotic tornado of death and destruction swirling around us. I pulled back on the Black curse of many, including Boss Wheeler, balancing out the fight where it needed it and making sure the maximum number fell beneath the many bats and blades. Our one little table remained off-limits in the middle of it all, as did the doors to the kitchen, but everything else was a go.

"Back off," I thought, barring *Koki-Ten* from slipping through her dagger into the heart of Gaines. *"You're mine."*

The death-demon answered with a purr, stroking my mind with a touch less chaotic than the moment before. *"Don't be jealous. He isn't one of the Get. It would never last."*

"Pull yourself together," I replied as the last fighters were going

down. *Koki-Ten* summoned what was left of the curse, the broken bits of its Black soul still floating in the hearts of men or on the floor, siphoning it back into the dagger and removing the unnatural strength from every predator around us. I yanked the fang-dagger from the table, freeing Boss Gaines.

"*You enjoyed that?*" I thought.

"*Much. I grow stronger with the gathering of my energy while my sister fang weakens.*"

Boss Wheeler wouldn't be getting up, ever. His head was pulped by an iron bar that had traded its dusty corner for a pool of blood seeping through the floorboards. Gaines, for his part, was ashen, yet free of the curse of the Black addiction and lacking the overconfidence instilled by Wheeler's long run.

Sheathing *Koki-Ten*, I grabbed the bent bolt from across the table where Wheeler had left it and handed it to Gaines. "Take it."

Gaines examined it carefully. "One of Shaktoe's bolts," he said, thinking through things for a moment. He pocketed it and nodded. "I want my son, Rifter. The Badger holds him."

"Deal. Now, give me every Black vial and every Nantine refugee that you've got stashed around here. And I mean every single one."

By dusk, another dozen weak and five strong doses of Black sat safely in my pack, and twenty-five poorly kept children trod up the Slopes, following us to the Duke's Hold. Jae was among them, still in shock at the pub's condition as she was escorted through, out, and up the grimy stairs, a gold mark sitting safely in her pocket.

Jill had gone quiet after the fight as if the violent chaos had touched a nerve or her day had finally played itself out. I rolled the scene back in my mind and admired the skill and creativity of the *Kjaira* as it destroyed the room and the harsh men within it without even lifting a fang. Boss Wheeler, a man of supreme control, would have died of envy if he'd survived long enough to appreciate the method of his fall.

Jillian was the ranking officer for Company Storm in Hamport until I could find someone better. Sergeant Keegan, the senior Scout, would act as her second, running the company's training activities and keeping an eye out for trouble or the arrival of more Nantine refugees.

Duke Chase had been courageous enough to meet all of the children we'd brought in and had taken charge. He'd been unaware of the dockside imports and the trade that had ended it all.

I followed my aunt's advice and handed Jillian Stone off to Lady Breen. The duke's wife was more than perceptive and would keep the inquisitor's mind engaged in kinder topics of discussion.

Lady Breen, ever true to form, played the part of a friend perfectly. "Lord Storm, what is your real name? I can't accept such a precious gift without at least knowing that."

The precious gift drifted quietly on the couch beside me, resting her head on my shoulder one last time.

"Ara."

"Annette," she replied. "And Jillian will remember you, even if you do not."

A bit of wisdom from Vigil Thorn came to my mind. "The heart carries us through when one's mind has decided otherwise," I said, struggling, knowing the truth of it. "Inquisitor Stone is wise beyond her years." *And mine.*

"So she is, but what about you, Ara?"

"If I were honest, I might say that I'm more like those Nantine children, a bedeviled refugee of war, sent elsewhere and severed because of it."

The taste of exile sat bitterly on my tongue, and the Nantine sons and daughters left a familiar ache in my heart, prodding my thoughts toward Raven. There had been a particularly good reason why those children were sent down the coast, as was the case when Rae's father had sent her away years before, but an exile could only be rescinded if one's heart survived the round trip.

Sensing my sadness, Lady Chase smiled. "You aren't honest?"

The scars on my arm were the most honest thing about me as I held Jillian Stone carefully in place. Her hair smelled of cinnamon and sage.

"Annette, I'm a gray prince and as far from being honest as war is from peace. Unlike truth, which might stand on its own, honesty requires a heart, and war, like a demon, lacks any regard."

Chapter 24

The Exchange

Vigil Storm rode into Hampport with a company, fifty-strong. A week later, I entered the city of Stonnberg with two mean-faced Paladins and a pack of mostly debilitated Black. If you were wondering, we all smelled of horses, cold iron, and Hell, especially Hell. The mounts of Lankes and Lorde each carried a two-handed hellsword, *Vae'lin* and *Jin'rahl*, respectively. *Vae'lin* translated to 'Bloody Sand.' I didn't need three swords, and the pair deserved the trophies for putting up with my dark, detached moods. The third blade, *Do'Roru*, seemed the darker of the three, immovable. 'Eye of the Abyss' was the translation that came to mind when I held it. Daur didn't seem to mind its weight.

The tough pair of Paladins weren't only bodyguards, even if I treated them that way, and I wasn't merely Vigil Storm to them. I perceived their constant urge to take a good swing at me. It could have been an angry remnant from the death of Paladin-Captain Bujold, or perhaps from the shattered condition of Vigil Stone, or that of Jillian—Hell, I might have taken a swing at myself if I'd thought that I'd taken advantage of the woman's mental health—but it certainly couldn't have anything to do with the gray specter to which they'd been chained.

Stonnberg was the seat of two powerful men, Duke Ragir, Defender of the North, and Darius Peak, Wheeler's former partner and financial backer. I had business with both men and had settled upon a track that would hopefully lead me through the city without delay.

With Lorde and Lankes at my back, we stood at the entrance to the dining room of Cutter Hall, home of the Brotherhood of Paladins. Our stomachs growled for lunch, overlooking the two dozen sizable

paladins already digging in. I returned their stares and pulled gently on their relaxed confidence, hoping it would settle my rough-edged mood.

Paladin Davos Byrne, Captain of the Brotherhood's contingent in Stonnberg, offered us a cool greeting. I'd met him once before when I was first recruited into the Order, and at the time, he'd looked at me like I was so much excrement stuck on his shoe. I felt more like it now.

"Paladin Byrne, may I present Paladins Acker Lorde and Sealy Lankes, fresh off a tour of Westlake, Bridgeton, and Hamport and new to the Company of Vigil Storm."

Byrne sniffed, the smell of horses and sulfur barging in ahead of us. "Well met, Brothers. Join us for lunch. You too, Vigil."

In a way, I was trespassing in the domain of a rival faction of demon-fighters, one with its own codes and ways of waging their war. As a Vigil of the Order, I had every right to intrude and press them into my service, but facing such a critical mass would make that easier said than done.

Seated in the place of honor beside Davos Byrne, I ran my hand along the thick, wooden tabletop, finding the divot that I'd left last time I was here. Most of the Paladins in the room had seen me plunge a dagger through the hand of Cynan Black as we came to terms about his priorities almost two years earlier. Byrne had missed the fun, having been on his way to clean out a Hell-cave for Vigil Snow.

"Paladin Byrne, as I was exploring a Hell-cave a couple of weeks ago, I suddenly realized that I might need to relax a bit. We'll be staying in Stonnberg for a week or two, and I would like your help in finding some worthwhile entertainment."

The Brotherhood in Stonnberg took a relaxed view of life between demonic Hordes. I didn't blame them but expected to benefit from their familiarity with the city's Lower Districts. They couldn't fool me.

"Exploring a Hell-cave with those two?" said Byrne, waiting on the punch line. He didn't wait long.

"No, I went in by myself. They were waiting outside, alongside Paladin-Captain Bujold, making sure nobody else fell in. Vigil Stone has an exceedingly well-trained company tucked away in Westlake."

My voice had risen a notch, making sure it would carry over nearby conversations to Lorde and Lankes. They each stole a guilty glance in

my direction.

I smiled and waved to the pair. "Captain Krait Bujold had thought it great fun to knock me out and drop me in. I killed him the following day."

A dagger through the table seemed the merest slip of manners after that remark, and the Hell-cave became an afterthought. If you're still wondering, I'd survived it.

After a quick confirmation from Lankes, Davos Byrne responded coldly, "Why are you here?"

"As I said, I'm a bit keyed up and looking to unwind before I leave town. I need a few sturdy fellows to show me around and watch my back."

"Don't you want to mention the Horde?" Lankes had been paying attention.

"Oh, that. Yes. There is a Horde, currently north of the Everest, but there's no telling its size or exact location or where it will go once I get to Niantia."

"Why isn't that the Nantine's problem?"

"Captain Byrne, you have plenty of experience countering the Infernal Horde, but have you ever seen an Infernal plague?"

"What the feth does a plague have to do with the Horde in Niantia?"

"An Infernal plague is a gathering of pestilent power, centered around a demon of some high standing. The plague consumes the hearts of the people it touches and, in turn, feeds the Horde, allowing it to grow beyond anything we've ever faced. Count the vaunted heads in this room and know that they won't be enough to distract it."

"And knowing this, you killed Captain Bujold?" said Byrne. He'd somehow managed to keep his tone of accusation to a minimum.

"I suspected but didn't have confirmation of the Infernal plague until shortly afterward, but as I said, one more head buried in the Brownbacks won't make a difference." It was as close to a confession as I would ever give.

Acker Lorde put an end to the trial. "Vigil Storm had asked for help in addressing the coming threat, but Vigil Stone and Captain Bujold both blocked it."

Paladin Byrne grew concerned. "And how is Vigil Stone?"

"Recovering," I replied. "I've requested that Stone move his entire company north by spring and certainly hope that he'll comply. I've conscripted fifty of his best for Company Storm and placed them in Hamport awaiting further orders."

"What will you do next?"

"Rest, if I can. We've got a big night ahead."

Duke Ragir was holding court, and for once, I felt like I fit in. We'd done our best to clean ourselves up at Cutter Hall but had kept our martial attire in place, minus the dust and the horsey perfume. I'd told Lorde and Lankes that they'd have the night off, but they'd only scowled in reply. Their attitude would do nicely.

The Duke's Hold covered several blocks, boasting tall stone walls and a single deep gate for entry. Inside, it boasted several keeps, stables, barracks, and courtly halls. We'd ridden in and waited in the gateway for an escort onward.

Sir Robin Sinclair came to collect us, and I felt his disappointment at my choice of bodyguards, the usual dark elves being exceedingly more pleasant and interesting in the Stonnberg Court's hallowed halls. It had been close to two years since we'd last met. I'd been in Stonnberg only a couple of months before but had been in a less than agreeable condition. The tall, middle-aged courtier still looked the same. His manner was refined but perhaps offered a bit less of his usually kind demeanor. We'd never forget that the bolt had been for me.

"Lord Storm, we had a feeling you might turn up. Duke Ragir awaits your visit." Sinclair didn't expound or make further small talk.

"Lead the way." I followed his cue, a reminder of my mission.

The Duke of Stonnberg had a pair of the most severe bodyguards I'd ever seen, competent and cold in their regard, almost comforting. Lorde and Lankes ran hotter, almost on edge, but they were more than effective in turning away the stares and upturned noses that loitered about the Duke's Hall.

Ragir took notice with a smile. "Vigil Storm, Paladins?"

Ragir was older than the King, sporting some gray in his neatly cut hair. As Defender of the North, he maintained a fit appearance and took all manner of threats seriously.

"They've joined me from Westlake. Black threats have been

spreading, and I find their shadows comforting.”

“And the princess? I would have thought her the most comforting of bodyguards.”

“Exactly right, Duke.” I couldn’t say more, having lost my candor somewhere along the way.

To the Duke’s right, a familiar face offered a serious bow and a stoic greeting, “Vigil Storm.”

Meryl Snow was gaunt, almost frail, with a sharp mind and a court-trained charm that served his father well. As Lynda’s brother, he was a sure, fine fellow and could do no wrong in my eyes. His presence was a surprise and an omen of things to come.

I nodded back, sticking to the intended script. “Duke Ragir, may we move to a private setting. There are grave tidings that you must consider before the spring campaign.”

There had been more than a feeling that I’d turn up, and Ragir’s private meeting room held more than I’d expected. Backed by a pair of young sentinels, Mott Duncan stood beside Gabriel Hartwell, Snow’s Warden. It shouldn’t have been such a surprise, but the shock of seeing the familiar faces and their unchecked concern leaned heavily on my mind. Duke Ragir had been relieved as I’d walked into his Hall, and I immediately realized why. Dark tidings had already arrived.

I made the introductions for Lorde and Lankes. As Paladins, they held their own standing separate from that of a Vigil. They would need to know what they were getting themselves into, whether they watched my back or not.

As the guest of honor, I got to ask the first question before we dove into the situation. “Warden Hartwell, where is Vigil Snow?”

“He’s pushing into the Everest Range with Captain Glenn’s section. Scouting for threats north.”

Though it paled compared to that of Vigil Stone, Snow’s perception was considerable, and perhaps by moving north, he’d detect the Horde on the far side of the mountains.

“We’ve funded the construction of an outpost a day north of Berykholt,” said Ragir. “Following your last visit to Stonnberg, a company of heavy foot and another of engineers were allocated to Lord Snow, stealing a march on the preparations for the spring

campaign.”

“Any word from Bastian?” I said.

“None, but the passes farther north aren’t worth challenging for at least another month.” Duke Ragir hesitated. “Vigil Storm, what have you seen?”

Much.

I started with the safest thread first. “Refugees, mostly children, smuggled into Hamport confirm the loss of several western Nantine cities and the splintering of that realm beneath a vast demonic presence.”

Mott wasn’t the only one confused by that. “The demons have taken control of the cities?”

“No, the demons have destroyed the cities, leaving nothing but ruins. On the west coast, only Kelton survives. Some call it Sanctuary now, like its Bay, but the desperation seems to be genuine and growing. Children are being shipped away on any trader that will take them, often being traded for food. The Realm of Niantia has fallen in every sense.”

Those inhuman facts slammed into the hearts around the room, hardening everyone’s resolve and making way for the next piece of the puzzle.

Duke Ragir saw it first. “What else?”

“The source of Niantia’s destruction is an Infernal plague, witnessed by me and confirmed by Vigil Moon. Don’t ask how but know that a glimpse of it almost destroyed Vigil Stone twice. The plague feeds the Horde, sustaining it and allowing it to grow. It’s been doing so for several years.”

Warden Hartwell knew the death of that. “It could be immense, hosting thousands of Hellions.”

The Duke offered a sensible question, “If it’s been there for years, why should we be so concerned about it now?”

Meryl Snow had been soaking in the news, burning through it as his sister would. He answered the Duke with a question of his own. “Ara, if the plague feeds the Infernal Horde, what feeds the plague?”

“People. The energy from their hearts in particular. The Nantines are used and consumed. It’s not surprising that the Horde is devouring

whole cities. We saw this in the Akio Valley on a vastly smaller scale. The Horde is feeding itself and gathering power for the Pestilent entity that's in charge."

Demons were apex predators, the top of the food chain when they came into our world. Perhaps that was the draw. Maybe the Infernal Domain was overly competitive. Maybe it was Hell on those that lived there, and they needed to share their grief.

I needed to stop right there and ask about Meryl's sister. She was due to deliver her baby in a couple of months. *Feth*.

"Meryl, please tell Lynda that I'm sorry for not being there for the birth of her son. I leave my heart with them both."

"And where the feth will you be?" Mott Duncan already knew the answer.

I would be elsewhere, dining with a Black prince.

"Tracking down the Black heart of Niantia and ending the plague."

"With Company Storm stashed away in Lockrun?"

"Warden Hartwell and Duke Ragir can orchestrate the defense of Colivar. Company Storm also garrisons Hampport, but lacks a proper second, or even a first, at the moment, but if Vigil Stone responds as requested, Colivar will have a chance to preserve its northern cities."

Duke Ragir looked at Gabriel Hartwell with concern. "A chance?"

"Lord Ragir, we don't know the size of the Horde we're facing or how it will react, but we do know of two more immediate targets for the Horde to attack: Bastian and Kelton. We can ignore those, using our time to blockade all the lower passes, or we can make the Horde pay when it attacks one of those cities and perhaps gain the upper hand."

I'd seen enough to know what wouldn't work. "The mountain passes will be difficult to block, the demons will simply surround and overrun the defenders, and you don't have time to build a strong enough citadel everywhere it's needed."

The demons' claws allowed them to move across the roughest terrain, and their chaotic nature made them difficult to predict. Sheer stone walls would slow them down and might make a critical difference when dealing with any Horde.

My permanent connection to the line of Ylamil pulled me back into reality, a hundred insistent voices coaxing me toward a different path,

as did the Warden's focus on finding the right solution. When Gabriel Hartwell laid out the choices, there was only one sensible option.

"Warden Hartwell, a joint defense of Bastian would be most formidable. Their stone curtain wall is over thirty feet high and clean-cut. The dark elves are fierce when it comes to fighting for their own survival."

"I agree. And Kelton on the coast?"

The docks of Hamport were my ticket north while the passes were closed to everything else, but it would likely be a one-way trip. If Kelton was seen as a sanctuary of sorts, I had to believe that they had a defensible position. We had to try.

Feth.

"Mott, have you ever been out to sea?"

"With you, Ara? Almost every day."

Chapter 25

Oddsmakers

A broad-brimmed bush hat clashed with my expertly tailored clothes from Master Cade. I wore my reinforced leather riding jacket, cleaned to perfection, and the fang-dagger that carried *Koki-Ten* was sheathed across my chest. It was a look, fashionable and expensive, and perfect for a wealthy traveler, newly arrived and looking for some fun.

Early Vale wore a style that matched a gentleman's valet, and my bodyguards, four burly Paladins, joined us dressed to kill, literally. My travel purse carried plenty of currency, mostly shiny, some oily and black, and we had chosen a venue, the Badger's Den, where the house always wins. I figured they'd have enough to cover our bets. Somewhere in the dark Stonnberg streets, Mott and Cilli scouted ahead, checking our route for any unexpected dangers.

I'd become a fan of the fighting pits in the Lower Districts of the continent's major cities. In my previous experiences, I'd always ended up in the ring for one reason or another. Usually, I was fine with that, but it wasn't in tonight's plan. More than that, it was something that had to be avoided at all costs. Tonight, we'd be testing out Early's ability to gauge the favorites in every fight and planting the seeds of my future relationship with the boss of Stonnberg, Darius Peak.

The hall was enormous and lit in an unnatural glow, a hint of the entertainment to come.

"They have a witch?" I murmured to my nearest bodyguard.

Paladin Jaxon Creel appeared ready to place a few bets on himself as he replied, "There's a reason that the house always wins here. Their hag sets the odds before each fight. The betting limits rise as the

night progresses and depend on the enthusiasm of the crowd.”

Lorde and Lankes had the night off, making room for peers that were more familiar with Stonnberg’s finest fighting dens. Each man had been hand-picked by Davos Byrne for their ability to avoid any seemingly permanent trouble. I’d never been one to hedge, but I appreciated his sentiment.

The hall’s crowd, several hundred eager players from all rungs of the ladder, was warming up as a pair of oversized thugs pounded each other into oblivion inside a huge steel cage in the center of the makeshift arena.

“The bloody blonde will win,” said Early.

I would have gone with the other, the one with blood on his knuckles and not his face. Creel agreed, offering a quick side bet to Early. A minute later, the bloody blonde was also half-blind but standing over his opponent’s dormant form.

“Gentlemen, bet to your heart’s content, but stay close.”

It didn’t take a huge investment to start the night rolling, but we kept it in play, always pushing our winnings into the next bout. After several rounds, the Paladins had caught on. They were following Early’s lead and racking up their own string of wins. That’s when things took a turn.

We’d been catching glimpses of the witch in between fights, trying to detect her methods for picking winners and setting odds. She would always short the apparent winner. That all changed with a jump in the betting limit.

Early picked the next winner, and even I could see it was the right call. One man was a beast, both in size and fury, holding a steel club, while his opponent was average, holding only a hunting knife, a weapon barely suitable for slashing or stabbing. For once, the house offered even odds, telling us that something was up. It was a honey trap, goading the masses to back the beast for a decent payoff after a long night of stingy returns.

The crowd didn’t notice the tinge of Black that stained the smaller man’s soul, nor did they feel the excitement run through the handle of my dagger.

“Blood sport,” Koki-Ten hissed as if it were missing out.

Early and I went off to lay the max on the knife-wielder. We

returned, having doubled our money again and putting a big dent in the house's expected winnings. A dodge, duck, and slide had ended the fight with a severing of the larger man's left gonad. The steel club dropped and rolled, mocking the big beast as he did the same on the arena's deeply stained floor. It was the quickest fight of the night thus far, and things were about to heat up further.

The next fight was straight, no Black chaser, but again smelled off. Quite simply, it was staged. Neither fighter seemed particularly on edge nor raging like the rest, so we all sat back, watching the nonsense, cheering with the best of them at the outcome, and holding on to our winnings.

Several times we were accosted by strangers leaning into our space, trying to listen in or to start a rumble that would get us all tossed. Finally, a better-dressed gentleman offered us a spot in the owner's box, knowing that we wouldn't refuse. It would have seemed odd otherwise, so we accepted the invitation with our Paladins leading the way.

As owner of the Badger's Den, Fremont Gold was an almost likable fellow, likable for the fact that he was rolling in his last name and showing off to everyone in the place. "How's your night been so far, gentlemen?"

There was no doubt that the man knew exactly how our night was going, but I played along. "Slow. While I keenly admire your house's ability to set accurate odds, I find the betting limits a trifle too serene. I like to sweat a bit when I play. Don't you?"

In our pockets, we had enough to buy the hall of Fremont Gold, if not his business or the right to run it in Darius Pike's backyard.

"May I see your markers, sir?"

"Call me Mister Gray," I replied, handing him an identical pair of fortunes. "I'm on a bit of a holiday, hiding out from my wife."

This last, while all true, was the perfect foil to the man's truth-teller, who was standing with her hand on the owner's shoulder. Dressed as an enticing distraction, the woman and her focus were almost perfect. My respect for Fremont Gold went up a notch at his brilliant setup.

Gold frowned as he considered the debt he was holding, "Perhaps we can turn up the heat for the chance at clearing these markers. We

pride ourselves in our returning clientele.”

I placed my hand on Early’s shoulder. “You up for a challenge?”

Early looked a bit pale. We were gambling a fortune and walking straight into a friendly trap that could completely waste our entire night’s efforts.

“Mister Gray, I can see you have a bit of an expert on hand when it comes to betting. Perhaps we agree to do without our outside help for the next round?”

“Does that mean you’ll set aside your oddsmaker for our private wager and let me set the odds?” I stared daggers at the middle-aged woman that lurked to the owner’s left, daring her to speak.

Freemont didn’t flinch, even as his seer almost hopped out of her skin. “Certainly, Mister Gray. Will you wager both markers at once?”

“Of course, but I’m open to risking even more, given the right game.”

Early took a step back, standing among our bodyguards behind me. The witch was sent down to the floor, escorting the combatants into the ring for the next bout, a two versus two contest with long knives in a seemingly matched set. There was nothing to tell them apart except the bitter flow of the Infernal creeping through the veins of one pair.

“Master Gold, from where we stand, you’ve chosen a perfectly even match, so let’s double the fun. First, assuming that you know your fighters far better than me, you’ll give me two-to-one odds. Second, I’m willing to wager twice what we carry in those markers, and third, I’ll let you pick your favorite.”

Gold’s initial frown became an expression of concern followed by a mask for the simple glee of relief as he foresaw his night heading back into the black. It was a different kind of black.

“One final condition, no signaling to anyone below as to our wager or our choices. That last bout was a farce beyond belief, and for what I’ve got riding here, I don’t want a weak fething brawl to end my night.” I may have growled that last bit to make sure he understood.

“Agreed. I’ll take the bearded pair,” said Gold, locking us into the lucrative exchange. “And your collateral for our bet?”

“Beards are bad luck. I offer triple.” I opened a bag of gems and poured them into the owner’s hand. “Tell me when to stop.”

Gold was greedy. *Who knew?* He took half the contents of my leather gem bag and transferred them to another purse, along with our two markers. Down below, the house offered even odds to the masses as the witch slammed the door on the heavy cage. The fighters jogged in place, warming up, waiting for the bell to start.

I rested my hand on my dagger, keeping an eye on the guards stationed around us. “Master Gold, should I win our little wager, who would be guaranteeing the payment?”

The four Paladins at my back shuffled closer, drawing everyone’s attention. It was only polite to include them in the conversation.

Fremont Gold was suddenly having a great night. He eyed the new bag of gems sitting between us and offered his most gracious tone, “The Boss of Stonnberg, Master Peak, is a man of unmatched focus when it comes to finances. He will honor the markers, and I will personally make the introductions.”

I hated to ruin his good mood. “Ring the bell.”

The Black curse was a contract of sorts, a guarantee depending on who had control. The men in the ring were evenly matched, and there wouldn’t have been anything that we could have done to twist the odds in our favor if they’d been clean. By consuming doses of Black, even diluted as they were, the bearded pair had every advantage in speed and killing power but lacked control over themselves with *Koki-Ten* in the room. The Black-tainted blood belonged to her, after all, and the demon painted it on the arena floor in a most artistic manner.

By match’s end, the bearded team had given a few minor cuts to the arms and legs of their opponents in exchange for a deep gash across one hairy throat and a piercing thrust inches deep into his partner’s temple. Neither man would be getting up or forgetting to shave ever again.

Koki-Ten cackled in a most unseemly manner, a master pulling the invisible strings of her puppets and enjoying a thin reward in the shavings of energy that returned as the men died. There’d been plenty of bearded killers in Bridgeton. Many had fed the demon directly through her fang or indirectly from beneath the nearby hooves of forty stampeding horses.

I scooped up my bag of collateral, placing it safely into my shoulder

pack. "As I said, Master Gold, those bearded men were cursed, *Sarpa* in the old tongue. Do you know the word?"

In the spreading silence around us, I removed my hat.

Momentarily stunned, Fremont Gold could only nod at the gray. Another man, perhaps his second, hurried forward with another marker, placing it gently onto my palm as if paying homage.

"When and where shall we meet with Master Peak?" I held out a single black vial, a rare offering to ease the sting of the night's losses.

The dose wasn't the best vintage, but it still had a kick and plenty of invisible strings attached.

Fremont Gold cleared his throat, his mind stuck on a puzzle of misfortune as he accepted the gift. "Please allow me a few days to arrange a meeting. Where can we find you?"

"Leave a message and a bag of diamonds worth a quarter of what is owed at Cutter Hall. I trust the Paladins there, and they'll know where to find me. We can settle the balance with Master Peak in person."

"Paladins?" Gold glanced at the inky vial in his palm. Employing a witch, he knew with certainty what the vial contained.

I let him know that I hadn't been fooled, "Bodyguards for whenever the beards turn black."

Chapter 26

Early Returns

The following day, Early Vale was sent back to Caleb Masterson, traveling to Berykholt in the company of Mott Duncan and Cillian Redd. Vale was far too valuable to remain on the table, a shiny bauble for the Weasel, and he'd only be a target if he remained in Stonnberg. He'd more than earned his keep and needed to disappear. I'd sent along a message to Sergeant Masterson, a blank page of parchment. He'd figure it out.

My day was spent training with the Paladins in Cutter Hall, working them up to speed and burning off any accumulated rust that they might harbor. Our night of wagering had grown into a legend, and it made me a popular sparring partner when I told them that my lucky charm had left town.

The Paladins were given free rein to take their best swings. The exercise and intensity seemed to clear my head, as did further meetings with Duke Ragir and Warden Hartwell. With logic and concern, their disciplined minds pulled me back to reality. Somewhere in it all, I got to feeling like I'd made a mistake or that I was imprisoned, waiting on a way out. I walked between the real and the unreal, hoping to approach the mind of a heartless enemy and disappear. Only then could I do what needed to be done.

The first key to my prison door arrived as promised, three days after it had been won. The Badger didn't play around, delivering a large pouch of finely cut diamonds in white and black and a note requesting a meeting the following afternoon at the Badger's Den. It was signed with a single black dot of alien ink.

It was a test. I didn't suggest moving the location to a more neutral setting, nor did I conscript a dozen more Paladins to tag along. Instead, I went alone, bringing only the essentials. Anything else would have been a distraction and a path to failure.

With *Exile* sheathed across my right shoulder and a travel pack looped across my left, I'd kept *Koki-Ten* strapped across my chest. It was a comfort thing.

The big hall was empty and clean, ready for the next raucous crowd. Security was more than ample. Guards ringed the far fringes of the room with the occasional Bowman hidden among them, taking aim. My mind raced around the space, checking the concentration and the souls of everyone, including the boss himself, Darius Peak.

Wearing the trappings of a duke and a ridiculous gold-feathered hat, the Badger of Stonnberg was flanked by a dozen underlings: bodyguards, hands, accountants, and the witch. Fremont Gold was present as well, looking a bit less burnished than the last time we met. The arena cage was to my left with a young man waiting inside. I walked forward with my hand resting on the hilt of *Koki-Ten*. Two bowmen, both placed above and directly behind me in the stands, wore her fiendish perfume. I'd met one of them before.

Boss Peak was a nervous sort, his eyes moving about more than mine, trying to guess my game. "Mister Gray, you've come alone."

If only I could win by intimidation alone.

"Master Peak, I am never alone. In fact, I have friends here in the hall already."

It was time to collect. I stared at the witch, forcing her to meet my gaze. She shook, taking a small step back, and I yanked hard on her fear. Witches always sat topmost on my list of priority threats.

"You've met Helene? She might have a few words for you," said Peak by way of introduction.

"I bet she has one word for me, and she'll likely keep it to herself."

Helene nodded, not returning Peak's stare. There was plenty of blood-stained sand to his right that he could pound.

"Master Peak, a king's ransom is owed. I've come to collect it."

"Oh? Where would you like to start?"

"Who's in the cage?"

“His name is Rifter Gaines. You’ve heard of him?” Peak knew that I had.

“Let him out,” I tossed Wheeler’s scratched and dented ring to Peak. “He’s mine now.”

“Rifter still owes me for certain merchandise that went undelivered.”

“Let. Him. Out.” The hiss of a death-demon filled my mind as the fury built. “Until he has been handed over, you’ll have no further claim to make from me.”

The Gray rules covered all transactions of the lower reaches in Colivar. Peak was looking for some sort of leverage, but he was bargaining with Laila Storm and all that she’d taught me in that regard.

Peak snapped, his fingers clicking, and the prison gate swung wide. “As you say, Mister Gray. For one so young, where did you learn the Gray rules?”

“Master Wheeler never thought to ask, and yet, in the end, he knew.”

“And so, I ask in the beginning, that such violent endings might be avoided.”

“I admire your wisdom, but there is a cost for such information, is there not?”

Nothing would be free for this weasel if I could help it.

“Quite right,” Peak couldn’t hide his annoyance. He still owed more than he could stomach.

Rifter Gaines stood beside me, a man near to me in age with unruly black hair, smelling of cloves and salt with an expression reeking of a big dose of feth it all. He wasn’t intimidated in the least by the Weasel’s blather or the threatening stares of his men.

“What was it that Mister Gaines lost?” I said.

“He took several vials of a certain rare elixir and diluted the rest to hide his theft.” Peak believed every word that he said.

“Feth off,” said Gaines. He believed every word as well.

The answer was simple yet an embarrassment for the boss.

“Mister Peak, didn’t Wheeler tell you that the source of the Black was drying up? That the elixir was arriving in a diluted state?”

“How would you know?” Peak replied.

“Because I killed the source and took every vial that Wheeler had.

The quality varied greatly.”

The Badger’s eyes glinted. “You control the supply of Black doses?”
In more ways than one.

“I control what’s left of it. Why?” Reaching into my pack, I pulled out a handful of the small bottles and let them trickle and clink their way back in.

The Weasel twitched at the sight of the pure, dark power in a bottle. He coveted the stuff, needing a way to convert his vast wealth into something more influential. “You brought it *all* with you?”

“Sure,” I said. “Are you ready to deal or not?”

It was always a trap.

Darius Peak nodded, “And kill two sparrows with one stone? Of course.” A simultaneous pair of sharp clicks answered. The witch caught a bolt through her left eye while another punched the hat right off of the boss’s head.

Koki-Ten shrieked in my mind, waking *Madd-Jak* in my ring. The flicker brought the Peak’s attention back to where it belonged.

The two bowmen behind me stood up, feeling as stunned by their exceedingly poor aim as Darius Peak and his men. An indoor shot, no wind, stationary targets, how could they possibly miss?

“I prefer to kill a witch,” I chuckled, allowing everyone a second to relax before I turned up the heat. “You don’t listen, do you, Mister Peak, nor do you honor the Gray rules when it comes to hosting a meeting between Houses. You have made a grave mistake.”

Without his hat, Darius Peak was speechless. *Who knew?*

Drawing my fang-dagger, I pointed it at the Weasel, “Can you offer me a reality where your continued existence makes any sense?”

As I spoke, *Koki-Ten*’s Black presence filled the room, surrounding the dozen men before me, whispering directly into their hearts and minds while I pushed and pulled on their fears.

“Kneel!” I screamed, and they did. Everyone in the hall bent under my rage, even Rifter Gaines. “Master Shaktie, front and center. Bring your weapon.”

While we waited for the bowman’s arrival, I pointed at Fremont Gold. “Have you the balance of my marker?”

Rifter rose and collected it, all of it, a full satchel of gems and every

dose of Black in the place. The witch had carried a small supply, as did Peak's bodyguards. Rifter also collected a fine hunting knife from one of the guards and kneed the man in the ear as payment.

"Yours?" I said.

"My dad's."

"Nick me." I held out my thumb, and he obliged, adding to my existing scars.

I reached into my bag and removed a Black vial, a weak potion, squeezing a few drops of my blood into it and leaving a nice thumbprint on the outside.

The boss failed to stand, his mind at war with his soul.

I offered him some help, "Darius Peak, you have wealth, but you don't have any power. Take this and drink."

Confused by my sudden offer, Peak took it, nonetheless. He stood up immediately; his whole being seemed to roar in approval as it absorbed the strange brew. "Mine," he said, ever the collector.

"*Mine*," echoed in my head, the kiss of a *Kjaira*.

"Just drink." I handed the boss another bloody vial, keeping the man on his feet as the first dose drained away.

Peak wanted more, as did I, but a rule of the Gray was to never take what you can't hold. It was fast becoming my favorite.

"Mister Peak, you are now officially 'the Weasel of Stonnberg' as a mark of your dishonorable ways. Drink. You will hand over any possessions you hold that are pertinent to the Dukes or the King of Colivar. You will do so by tomorrow afternoon, delivering them all to Cutter Hall. Now, drink."

Peak was a serious collector. He'd have plenty to share as he lost his grip on the world around him. He shook, fighting my words, even as he nodded in agreement and earned yet another dark drink, and another.

And another.

As Peak consumed the elixir, so did *Koki-Ten*, retrieving the dark energy and leaving only the strings of control in place. The boss was well-marked, having consumed my blood as well as the Black.

Shaktoe stood nearby, watching the improbable scene and nervously tapping his crossbow.

“Master Shaktoe, you work for the new boss of Hamport until he says otherwise. Tell him I sent you. Take your crew and go.”

Shaktoe, for his part, didn't blink. He gave me a quick bow and escaped with his parts still attached.

As the boss continued his binge, Rifter locked up Peak's bodyguards in the fight cage. No one appreciated their scowls, and their unease was distracting.

Fremont Gold was suitably upset at the loss of his witch and his full stash of Black doses, but he'd find other angles, and he wasn't about to challenge the Weasel over the man's poor choices or their coming consequences. Mistakes had been made, and the rules required that they be addressed. That I was pouring a Black fortune down the boss's throat made little sense, but it wasn't Gold's call or his blood.

Peak's addiction grew with each gulp. He drank every last drop of the bloody Black, and *Koki-Ten* siphoned off the lingering power it contained. By the end of the afternoon, the crude ties that bind were more like chains, all the vials were empty, and the death-demon was leashed. The energy it had consumed had been a slightly darker shade of Black, a mixture of Death and War.

Darius Peak, the addict, could barely stand. The power and influence he'd expected to hold had fled before he could ever use it.

My parting words hammered home, echoing around the cavernous hall and the boss's weary mind. “Master Peak, be grateful that you'll live to see me tomorrow. Cutter Hall, mid-afternoon at the latest. Bring full payment for all the Black doses you have just consumed. Don't be skinny and don't be late. You won't be forgiven a second time.”

Of the boss and his dozen minions, only the witch failed to agree. Rifter Gaines and I took the nearest exit out, leaving the boss to deal with his hangover.

“OK, that was some show back there. Now, who the feth are you?” Rifter walked through the evening streets with eyes that never stopped moving.

“I'm a bounty hunter sent by your father to retrieve his beloved son from the clutches of a weasel.” My voice may have sounded dry, almost brittle.

Rifter went with it. “Not the Weasel of Stonnberg, I hope.”

"The one and only. I heard that he kept his favorite pets in a gigantic cage. It was a treat to see that the rumors were true."

He held out his hand, doing his best not to smile. "Rift."

"Ara."

"Where are we headed?"

"Back to Hamport in a few days, but first to the Duke."

"The Duke? Doesn't he own that Gray pub near the Shetland River Bridge?"

I had no idea. "Which Shetland River Bridge? Aren't there like six of them?"

"Seven, but the one to Maidenhall is the biggest. It always gets first billing. I take it you're not from around here. Where do you fit in the Gray scheme of things?"

My answer was simple, "I'm the boss."

"Which one? Aren't there like a dozen or more of them?"

"Sure, but I get first billing."

"Maidenhall?"

"Nope, though I'll be glad to show you around if I ever go back."

"Bad blood?"

"Sort of. Story of my life, really. Just ask the Weasel."

My ring flickered to life, "*Play!*" storming through my head.

I shoved Rifter forward past the mouth of the alleyway on our left. Ten shadows charged, the lead man diving low for the tackle. If he'd managed to stay alive as he reached me, I'd have been dead, but he ducked his head at the last moment. I wind-milled, punching *Koki-Ten* through the back of his skull, and spun to my right. Stepping across the dying man's back, I leaped forward into their midst, using the alley's narrow opening to my advantage.

Only half of the attackers had consumed a weak dose of Black, but all had been shaded in some manner in order to spring the ambush. It was a professional job, on par with what I'd seen in Bridgeton. Like the ambush in Bridgeton, if I'd been paying better attention, we could have avoided them. The Weasel had never given me his best shot, nor had I shown him how bad an idea that could be. It was high time for some proper introductions.

I wielded *Exile* in my left while the fang in my right hand almost

moved of its own accord, and we split the column of attackers. *Koki-Ten*'s spatial awareness combined with the speed and power of *Madd-Jak*, leaving little doubt about the fate of the other nine assassins. *Koki-Ten* leaned on those with the Black, pushing on them enough to slow them down yet leaving enough of her imprint to know exactly where they were.

Exile destroyed those that were clean, cleaving necks and shearing limbs while *Koki-Ten* drank directly from the cursed. She craved the taste of her own blood, double-filtered through a man. I spun at the sound of a scuff behind me, and twenty feet away at the neck of the alley, Rifter stood with his hunting knife in hand, looking for someone to fight. There wasn't anyone left.

A gentle whisper caressed my mind, "*Four heartbeats were all it took.*"

"*Stop that.*" I sheathed my dagger and broadsword.

"First billing, you say?" said Rift.

I could see he didn't believe a word of it. "Always. Now, about that pub, do they have a decent view of the bridge?"

Chapter 27

Rifter Returns

“Why do you think I’m in Stonnberg?” said Rift.

I was enjoying a decent dinner at the Dirty Duke Pub. “Wheeler needed someone to keep the Weasel’s cage clean?”

“Something like that,” said Rift. “And the Weasel needed to stay in control.”

“You know where he lives, right?”

“Of course.”

“Need to pick up anything there before we leave?”

“Not really. I travel light.”

“Anyone special here or back in Hamport?”

Rifter shook his head. “As I said, I travel light.”

He was bluffing. The subtle blush of his skin made that perfectly clear, but I didn’t call him on it. If I’d believed him, I might have asked him how he did it.

“How about you?” he asked.

Perhaps, he thought it a light topic. It should have been, but my hesitation said it all.

“Sorry,” he said.

“No, we’re even. It’s been too long since I’ve seen my family, and it’s going to be even longer. Once we get to Hamport, I’ve got another trip to take.”

“Family is important to a lethal bounty hunter?”

“Don’t sound so surprised. You grow up as an orphan, and family becomes everything to you, especially when you don’t have it.”

“I have an older sister, Viv. She’s about your age, I think.”

I rubbed my nose, the itch in my brain running rampant. "I'll be twenty this summer. How old is your sister?"

"Twenty-five," he winced. "You're a bit old for your age."

"Sure am," I smiled. "And you?"

"Eighteen. My father sent me this knife for my birthday last month."

"Glad you got it back. You can do a lot with a good blade like that."

"So can you, though I didn't get a chance to see it. One second, I'm being tossed out of the way, and by the time I get back on my feet, there are ten dead men between us."

"Don't tell my bodyguards. They're already going to kick my butt."

"They don't like you going out alone?"

I laughed, "No, they're just fethin' mean."

Lorde and Lankes had cornered me in the dining room at Cutter Hall, blocking any escape. They might have been upset that I'd left them behind for the day. *Bodyguards. Who knew?*

Lankes offered me his warmest greeting, "You fether, Duke Ragir's man came by looking for you this afternoon, and here we are looking like a couple of complete idiots without a clue, having to tell the gentleman that you seemed to have wandered off."

"Sir Sinclair?" I murmured, trying to maneuver out of Acker Lorde's personal space.

"It might have been serious. The man was plainly worked up that you weren't available." Lankes knew the answer, but he was too worked up at the moment to think straight. "Now, why the feth are you covered in blood?"

"Packing for our trip," I said, shrugging my left shoulder.

Lorde stepped back and grabbed my pack. "Feth me. You collected on that marker?"

"Every last stone. More's due by tomorrow afternoon, and we're heading back to Hampport the day after that."

"And the blood?" said Lankes. He was calming down, too.

I wasn't in the mood to explain anything further. "Gentlemen, please meet Rifter Gaines. He's heading home to Hampport with us."

Rifter gave a short wave and a yawn as if he sparred with the Paladins every day. Rift was an inch or two shorter than me but carried

plenty of muscle. Still, he was outclassed by my bodyguards by at least fifty pounds, not counting axes, armor, or mean thoughts.

Lorde almost seemed jealous, "What's he to you?"

"He's a friend," I replied. "Now find him a bunk and give us all some peace. I'll check in with Duke Ragir tomorrow."

The following day was spent training, and as a favor, Davos Byrne kept the chapter in full armor and kit throughout the afternoon. It was good for building up the callouses and finding the rough spots for adjustment before any campaign. It also made a significant impression on weasels.

The boss's bodyguards were left outside, with only Darius Peak and his hangover daring to enter. We were given a corner of the dining room to ourselves while the rest of the room was in full use by the Brotherhood and the sharpening of two dozen double-bladed axes.

Peak was on time. There was a shallow emptiness throughout his being, and a sort of surrender had settled in. *Koki-Ten* purred from her perch, and the man seemed to perk up. I had a different message in mind but accepted the pouch and Peak's explanation of each of the items that it contained.

There were several rings, a scarf, a seal, and a dagger. The seal was a fine forgery of the Duke of Stonnberg's own, and it would be heading to the Paladin's blacksmith for melting down. The rings were valuable, yet not overly so, trinkets compared to the jewels adorning the Weasel's sticky fingers. The scarf was exotic, made of smooth gray silk bearing a foreign pattern and speckled with brown-red blood. A warm breeze seemed to blow through the room when I held it, and strength like a volcano filled my heart. Whoever had owned the scarf had to have been a queen. I wrapped it around my wrist and called it 'Summer.' The final item, an ornate dagger, had once been worn by the prior Duke of Stonnberg.

I handed the gaudy blade back to Peak. "A gift," I said.

Rifter confirmed the transaction, "Quite a worthy weapon. Now, what about the payment for all the Black doses that you consumed? And don't pretend that I don't know what you paid Wheeler for each vial."

Rifter Gaines carried more than an axe to grind with the Weasel. Having been treated as a possession for far too long, the young man was enjoying the scene immensely.

The boss scowled, but it was a half-hearted effort, the other half being hooked on *Koki-Ten*. "These should suffice, several holdings for you to use outside Stonnberg. I assumed that you'd rather not have the funds in gold marks, the price of wagons being what they are these days."

I didn't know what I was expecting out of the Weasel, but certainly more than baubles and deeds to places I'd never seen. Part of the meeting was to test out our control over his most determined trait and whether we could force him to let some of his rare things go. In that regard, the meeting was a success. The problem was, I didn't truly know what I wanted or what I should be squeezing from the greedy man.

I needed peace, final and unbending for the duration that I would be gone, however long that might be, and it appeared that we had the foundation of a lasting truce. More was owed by the Weasel of Stonnberg, but it didn't have to all be for the Gray Prince. I had many more worthy names than that.

I paged back through the stack of deeds, finding one that I wanted. It was a start. "Master Peak, please load up the wagon. I believe that you've just become immortal."

My meeting with Duke Ragir, Warden Hartwell, and Meryl Snow was a bust. As far as I could tell, yesterday's urgency to find me had washed away downstream, and the tedious process of preparing for war had begun in full. In that, at least we were on the same page.

"Forgive me for the misunderstanding. We've got things sorted here," said Ragir. "Where will you go next?"

"Hamport, to rejoin my company, then up the coast to Kelton. Maybe I can take some heat off of Bastian for you before I head inland."

"Do you know where you're going?"

"Not really, but I've got a feeling that I will once I get there. It's the gift of being a Vigil, you know." I smiled and offered my hand, not

wanting to drag things out.

Meryl Snow held out his hand. "Ara, I know there is nothing more that I can say—good luck."

"Meryl, forgive me, and ask the same of your sister when you see her."

"She already has. She knows where you're headed."

Straight to Hell. I didn't say it out loud.

"Warden, the Paladins are getting ready. I've warmed them up a bit. Don't waste them on the caves. We'll sort those whenever I come back."

"You will come back, won't you?" said Gabriel Hartwell.

"If you see your nephew, tell him that standing orders still apply once the threat has ended." I had to admit that I didn't travel lightly after all.

Hartwell smiled at that bit of news. "Then, let's hope we prevail. Saints be with you."

I wished that were the case, but I had other plans.

The many odors of Hamport set upon us long before we reached the city itself. What began as a fresh, salty ocean breeze became steadily more polluted with the many natural gases of the city's untold masses, the chimneys and livestock, the decay, and the combined drainage, most of which flowed out into the narrow bay. Was it really that bad? Sure, but you got used to it.

I'd left Hamport hoping to end the Gray war before I traveled north. Returning with my spoils, a backpack full of gems and a wagon full of gold, I was left feeling almost as empty as the Weasel coming off his Black bender. Wealth was never my weapon or my source of power, but I hoped it could be put to good use, healing those that needed it most.

The two bodyguards at my back were joined by a third, Rifter Gaines, driving a sturdy wagon pulled by a full team of horses and escorted by four more Paladins from Cutter Hall. The chests that the wagon contained were roped in place to keep them from breaking apart under the weight of a fortune in gold marks, and the wagon's stout wheels would need some repair before making the return trip to

Stonnberg.

We parked the golden hoard in the Duke of Breen's stable yard. Yard hands gathered our horses while the Paladins drummed up a Ducal Guard detail, and I dropped off dispatches at the hold's gate for Lord Chase. They explained the latest news, plans, and the contents of the heavy chests, which included the deed to a furnished mansion in the Landed district. The Weasel didn't skimp when it came to himself or his name, and neither did the Scarred Man.

The Paladins went off to find Company Storm while Rifter and I took a long walk down the Slope, heading for his home. We'd only arrived in the city, and nobody would be looking for us, especially without the two behemoths that normally guarded my back.

Rifter's neighborhood was covered in watchers as the late afternoon sun dwindled down to dusk. The boss's house was robust and well-guarded, with a courtyard filled by the welcome wagon of Hampport. The watchers had beat us here. Rifter Gaines was home.

"Ara, please don't run off too soon. You've got to meet everyone first." Those were his last words before a sea of humanity crashed over him with hugs and handshakes all around.

I was about to back out the gate and make a break for it when Boss Gaines caught sight of me.

"Mister Gray, I see you had some success in Stonnberg." There was no ruining this man's mood today.

"The Weasel of Stonnberg has been caged," I said. "Though he's still dangerous if you stick your finger in and poke him. We've reached an agreement and a truce. Rift will tell you all about it."

"Rift? Only his friends call him that."

"As you say," I confessed.

"I'm Mino. It's short for Palomino."

"Ara. It's short for a lot of things best left unspoken."

"Rifter thinks you're a bounty hunter."

"Would you believe otherwise?"

"Maybe, but I saw what you did to Wheeler and his best enforcers, each one Blacker than the next. You didn't even move a muscle. If I didn't know better, I'd say that you were some sort of sorcerer."

He was fishing, and we both knew it. It was his yard, and he had a

right to know who was standing in it. He needed some sort of confirmation.

"Mino, I've been told that I must meet Viv before I leave. Would she hold anything against a man with one too many scars?"

"Hopefully not herself," he laughed without a hitch, a mirror image of his son. "Come on. I'll introduce you."

I had been dead for weeks, that was certain, but maybe it had been years. Being the one that delivered the new boss's son home safe and sound made me almost as popular as Rifter himself, which isn't such a bad thing in the middle of a block party. Mino Gaines was popular. He had a large, extended family and a charm to go with the hardness that his life demanded. Where Boss Wheeler was hard like a two-headed axe, Mino offered different responses depending on the situation.

Vivian Gaines was a voluptuous woman, beginning with her eyes and ending with her toes, which were light and never stopped dancing around the melee of a celebration. She rarely let go of her brother's arm, always checking that he was still within sight, and she did hold her body against mine for a moment with a welcoming hug. If I didn't already have plans, I might have stayed in a bid to be near her.

"What did I tell you?" Rifter was a happy man, his contentment glowing around him. "She's a doll, isn't she?"

"Beyond that," I confessed. "But I must be going. I've got to check on my next trip before it gets too late."

"And my dad?" Rift needed to know that things were all square.

"He seems to be doing fine, though I really hope that's your mom he's with."

"You know what I mean. He told me who you are. First Billing."

"First Billing is overrated. Hell, the bridge wasn't even that pretty." I turned to angle my way out.

It's amazing what you can do with a good hunting knife, especially as a person turns their back on you. You can lunge, piercing their spine. You can stab downward into the back of their neck, or you can slash them across the hamstring, crippling them for life.

Rifter Gaines did none of those. Instead, he leaned sideways and whipped his blade into the temple of the man about to try steps one, two, or three on me as I headed for the gate. The blade came in fast

and off-balance, only landing a shallow cut, but it was enough to startle the assailant while I spun away and armed myself. My ring still glistened, having warned me of the assassin moments before. I'd chosen to ignore it.

The unwelcome guest didn't even try to escape, falling under a barrage of fists and clubs. It's never a real party until someone is bludgeoned to death.

I picked up the hunting knife and found Rifter waiting beside his father, both looking at me with concern. The lamps in the yard seemed dimmer and the air thicker. Vivian Gaines stalked over with her arms folded and her smile masked.

I spun the blade in my hand, moving it faster than they could see, and held out the hilt to Mino Gaines, "I believe this is yours."

Chapter 28

With the Tide

The Hamport docks are busy, even at night. Shipments are moved in for loading the next morning, animals are herded into land-side pens, customs stamps are stamped, and holds are organized, all while the many sailors enjoy the bayside taverns, drinking and brawling their night away.

The ship that I sought remained dark. All activity had ceased, and even the pier was vacant. There were plenty of souls on board, but nothing too hostile as I followed the gangway onto the quiet deck. I tapped the shoreside bell once to get the captain's attention and waited.

The murmurs and raucous sounds of gambling below decks ceased at once. Captain Slack's head poked out a small trap door, followed by the rest of his body.

"Why not light a lamp or two?" I asked.

"The checkered flag. Harbormaster doesn't want us out and about at night."

"Are you loaded and ready to sail?"

"Yes, and thank you for the goods. We don't get too much quality or quantity, for that matter. The people of Kelton will be in for a surprise."

"When does the tide turn, Captain?"

"Not until morning. Will you stay here?"

The man was nervous. He wanted to be gone, with or without me, but he had waited, sticking to our agreement.

"Yes. It's safe and quiet here. I'm ready to go."

"You can use my cabin. I need a little more quality time with my

crew anyway.”

“I think that I’ll enjoy the fresh air for a bit first. I don’t mind the dark.”

“So, I’ve heard—I mean, thank you again, Lord Storm. We sail at dawn.”

After so many weeks of living on the border between Gray and Gold, the Gray war was over, and I’d found my passage north around the frozen Everest Range. I certainly doubted that Vigil Snow had managed to get more than a day into the range before he had to turn back. There was an ever-present Glacier blocking the trail, and it wouldn’t recede until mid-spring at the earliest. When it finally did, I would already be elsewhere, searching for a way to stop the plague and the Hordes it had birthed. There had to be more than one, I was certain.

One lived within my vision of the Infernal plague, dancing around a city with fire on the distant horizon. It lived off the plague and numbered in the thousands. Tied to the Emperor, it never moved. It devoured the souls of those within and grew in size, acting as an impassable barrier for all that would threaten the Pestilent Prince.

The other Horde roamed the land, collecting more fodder for the Damogir while feeding itself and destroying whole cities in the process. Soon the entire land would be barren, and the Hell-prince would move on to more populated lands, given a chance.

The assassin gave himself away as they moved carefully across the cluttered and silent deck—the slightest tap there, and again there, only closer. I kept my back turned and breathed deeply, knowing that their first and only target would be my heart. The sky was filled with stars; the moon was absent, creating a peaceful darkness where I could hide.

The nearby sounds had stopped. I held perfectly still, waiting for the right moment to react, but the assailant struck first, their words shattering the scene around me.

“You never see stars that brilliant in Maidenhall, do you?”

“I used to,” I said. “But not anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because I am elsewhere. A place where you can never go.”

"Why not?"

"Because I am there, and it is Hell."

"Will you return?"

"That is up to you, isn't it?"

"Am I allowed to touch you?"

"Again, that is up to you, but you shouldn't. You can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I am the Gray Prince no more."

A grip of pure steel closed upon my wrist, and rain fell upon my outstretched hand. The masts behind us began to shiver beneath a storm.

"You were never the Gray Prince. You were only my brother."

A bolt of lightning struck, blinding me, piercing my palm, and setting fire to the cloak of madness that sat upon my throne. In agony, I fell upon the deck and tried to crawl away, but I was chained, falling from the star-filled sky. The deck shook with thunder, and wave after wave, it carried me under.

A winter breeze, smelling of salt and chimney fires, drifted in, tickling my senses awake. The rolling had stopped; my ship had run aground.

The mattress was soft, no complaints, and my hand was bound in red and white. A blue steel manacle held my wrist, bolted in place, its chain full of slack as it disappeared down past the edge of the bed. Hart, my sister and inquisitor, slumbered in a nearby chair, her arm bridging the gap between us, her hand covering mine. Across the room, a mumble from Walker Grey escaped while he slept. The Paladins were always present these days, an unbreakable wall for me to lean against when I needed to stand. They were more than fighters, more than weapons. How many years did it take for them to reach that plateau of wisdom? Could I ever reach it?

I lifted my hand, guiding it to my lips, and I kissed the frail fingers that kept mine warm. Hart's wrist had been bruised by the ring of a manacle. Sevin was nowhere to be seen.

"He's sitting outside the door, if you are wondering," Hart whispered. "But I don't mind."

I whispered back, "There was a storm last night?"

"Yes, one that had been raging for weeks."

"Did I hurt anyone?" *Did I hurt you?*

"No," she said. "*Sorrow* feasted, and you fell upon the deck."

"You chained yourself to me? What if I had jumped overboard?"

"Would you ever consider that, knowing that I was chained to you?"

"No, but I haven't been myself."

"You can only pretend until your sister comes to call your bluff."

"I love my sister for that."

"Do you? Can you?" she said. She tried to be gentle, but I could feel her ire, her frustration at what she saw within me.

"Inquisitors are assassins with the sharpest of blades."

"How many have you—faced?"

"Dozens. Ten less than a week ago, assuming I've only lost a day."

"And the *Kjaira*, it is chained to you. Why?"

It was her duty to ask. I almost hated her for it, ruining the surprise.

"Hart, you are chained to me. Shouldn't you ask me why about that?"

"You're my brother, and I love you, but that death-demon lacks a heart. It exists only to kill."

"No. Like your brother, it exists only to serve," I said. "It has an incomparable ability to kill and weave itself into the souls of others, and much like your brother, that is why it has been chained." I lifted my arm and shook it, making my point.

"How did you chain the beast?"

"I poisoned it with my soul."

"The soul of a Gray prince?"

"No, the soul of Ara Storm, Vigil of the Order."

"And your heart? Does it still exist?"

"Yes, but not here. It is in Niantia, confronting the plague. It cannot offer more."

"Again, I call your bluff. What is that wagon doing outside? The one under constant guard?"

She obviously knew the answer to that.

"It is a gift for my sister that she might see me other than as I am; a bluff that she might forgive me for my mistakes and my brutality."

“You ask too much of me.” Hart smiled, offering the priceless feeling of absolution.

Waking from his slumber, Walker Grey imparted his own wisdom to the scene, “It is the power of an inquisitor, so use it. Your role isn’t to condemn or to comprehend, but to find and forgive your brother before he destroys himself completely.”

“And what is the power of a Paladin, Master Grey?” said Hart.

Walker stood and stretched. “To line the path of every Vigil that can’t seem to find their way forward.”

I rattled my wrist. “My path awaits if my sister allows it. Am I forgiven?”

Hart nodded, and as if to prove it, she handed me *Sorrow*, my original fang-blade. My armor and weapons hung on a rack to one side of the room, as did a clean change of clothes.

“Hart, you stabbed me last night on the ship?”

“If I can see the stars through your eyes, I can certainly see your outstretched hand.”

Walker Grey produced a tool, unbolting my manacle. “*Ber’yl* tells me your ship has sailed, so why don’t we find another and get this campaign started.”

A light knock on the door preceded the entrance of a familiar face. Sevin Martell followed a furious young woman into the room.

“What have you done to Vigil Storm?” Jillian Stone hesitated, confused by my unshackled appearance. She wrapped me in a hug and clawed back all that she’d missed while I was gone.

I hugged her back. “Jill, forgive me for running off as I did.”

“Is it over?”

“What?”

“The war.”

“Yes, but another is about to begin.”

As if on cue, my worlds collided. The room, enormous by any standard, was still far too small for the scene. Raven walked in with my sister Yseria. For a moment, I found myself hiding behind Jillian, my hands on her shoulders. It wasn’t a good look.

“Raven, have you met my new inquisitor, Jillian Stone?” I didn’t wait for an answer. “Jillian, this is Raven Ylamil-Storm, my wife and

Champion of Company Storm.”

Being a few years younger than the rest of us, Jillian still held her ground nicely, “Is she the reason why you were chained to the bed?”

Raven filtered her response, taking ownership of the situation. “Yes, it was.”

“Oh,” said Jill.

In the background, Yser winced. I shrugged.

Hart stepped in to save the day. “Ara and Jillian have a unique bond, not that of brother and sister or of intimate lovers, but of a pair of souls that have held each other afloat, saving each other’s lives under harsh circumstances. Jillian has suffered visions of the Infernal plague, a deep wound healed by her connection to Ara, while he suffers the curse of the Mad Black and a deeply broken heart.”

“How do you know about that?” said Jill, standing up to a room full of strangers.

“Because I have the vision scars too, and Ara’s touch quiets the chaotic noise. It’s been more than a year since I experienced the attack.”

Feth.

“Jillian, this is Hart Storm, my sister and inquisitor, and Yseria Ylamil-Storm, also my adopted sister and long-time bodyguard. Sentinel Sevin Martell is Hart’s bodyguard and beloved, and Paladin Walker Grey is your protector from this moment on.”

“I already have a pair of Paladins as bodyguards, and I have you,” she replied.

“Send them back to their brethren. From now on, you have the legendary Walker Grey.”

“And you?” She wouldn’t let me go that easily.

“Yes, you have me too. Just don’t chain me to the bed like the other women in my life.”

“I forgive you if they do.” With that, she left the room with her chin held high.

“Interesting girl,” said Walker Grey. “I like her better than her father.”

“You know Vigil Stone?”

“I wish I didn’t. He’s far too worthy of his name.”

Certainly true. Stone had never recovered nor forgiven himself for

the loss of his wife. Sure, he'd tried to get rid of me with his pet hellhole, but I'd shattered his mind and stolen his daughter away. I'd call us even.

"Sevin Martell, you have new orders. You and your brother Keil will escort Hart on a mission to retrieve and heal Vigil Stone. He's not half as likable as his daughter Jillian, but he can see twice as far as any other Vigil, and Company Stone is one of the largest Vigil companies in Colivar. We need him brought north in working order, or anything that I do in Niantia may be for naught."

"Why does he need Hart?"

"The bastard has encountered the plague visions twice and lost his wife in the process."

"But, Ara, who'll take care of you?" Saint Yseria knew who I had in mind but didn't miss her chance at digging under Raven's skin or mine.

"Sevin, before you go, please show Inquisitor Stone how to wield this dagger." I handed over *Sorrow*. "She'll be sailing up the coast with the rest of Company Storm, and I may need her to keep my wife at bay."

Yser laughed anyway.

I knew what I was doing, and the truth was that I hadn't forgiven Raven for the isolation of the previous month's war parade. Hart knew it, and I knew it, and maybe Raven did too, but my wife hadn't said a word to me yet, and I was too stubborn and hurt to go first. The manacles had been her idea. Of that, I was sure.

Bar Sinister

Heartless

"I'd accuse you of cavorting with the enemy, but I'm not even sure what that means. It is a term of the Outer Domain."

"Which? Cavorting? It certainly doesn't happen here, though perhaps Memet has seen it at the High Prince's court."

"Heartless," I chuckled.

"Another relic retrieved from elsewhere. Heartless has no meaning in a domain where none exist," Rei-Seeck replied. "But we have plenty of other words to fill the void."

The bar seemed uncommonly quiet, too quiet, and I knew the feeling. It was the calm before the battle when the Hell-knights and assassins were done deciding who would take the field, and the cohorts aligned under the banners of whichever generals remained. The void was a launching spot for chaos, an infinitely level plane to destroy.

"Harsh," I offered. "Cruel in a decadent sort of way. It's a worthy compliment yet lacking in poetic form."

"You rely on words when actions fill the stanzas of the Cycle."

"Have you seen the prison we inhabit? Any suggestions? Or have you become bored by your role in our little play? Are you looking for something a bit more exciting?"

"The Cycle spins, and you are being played, not playing. You are being fed and yet not enjoying the meal. You are nothing but a cache, bursting with energy."

"Perhaps it is time to burn a little off before Memet returns," I said.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

I leaned in close, tasting her neck and working my way toward her ear. "I'm right behind you, Sister. Keep talking."

Chapter 29

Blood Tiding

Only Yseria had remained, giving me the once over in terms of physical health as I emerged from the bath. Her critical eye found little to worry about on the outside. Hart and Jillian had the more difficult jobs.

"Now, where is Juno Hartwell?" I said, buckling on the last of my vambraces.

Yser hesitated. "She met someone in Fugaku."

"What do you mean, 'She met someone?'"

"Raven. Met. Someone. I think they connected."

My stomach was empty, helping me to swallow the bile that suddenly made a break for it. "Connected?"

"Don't worry. I think he reminds her of you."

"Yseria Warric, if you weren't my sister—"

"But I am, so I'm the one that gets to break the news. I think that she's confused, especially when it comes to the manacles."

I sat down on the bed to avoid shaking in my armor. It had been an utterly difficult stretch, and this was not how I expected it to end.

Saint Yseria picked up the chain and manacles and dropped them into my lap. "You really are a mess, you know. How could you even think of going it alone?"

I'd been so near to making my escape and arriving on the shores of Niantia bearing the proper frame of mind, one coated in a shiny layer of Black.

"What choice did I have?"

Yser didn't have an answer to that. She had a reputation for pulling

people's chains, sometimes literally as she was doing now, but two could play at her game.

"And, who said I was going alone?" I offered my most defiant tone.

"Well, you're not. We're all coming with you, even Careck."

The name sparked a fire in my mind, deep in whatever part reacted to danger. I knew that name. I'd heard it once, right before the *Kjaira* attacked us South of Berykholt.

"Yser, where is he?" I ran for the door.

"Ara, don't."

"Yser, where? As my sister, tell me right now."

"The duke holds him in his cells."

I sprinted down and out of our keep, drawing *Koki-Ten*. *Where is he?* I shouted.

In a cell, in the basement of the building behind the Duke's Hold. All playfulness had fled from the death-demon, a mirage leaving only eager anticipation of what was to come.

As I cleared the Duke's Keep, I saw Raven emerging from the Bailiff's Hold, a reinforced residence with stairs that led down to the jail's entrance. My fury bubbled forth, carrying me along. Ignoring Raven and Yseria calling behind me, I leaped down the stairs and entered the holding area for the prisoners.

"Where is the new prisoner?" I sheathed my dagger and flashed my Vigil coin.

"Ara! Stop!" Raven grabbed my arm. "What are you doing?"

The guard on duty looked confused.

I pointed at Raven. "Show me who she was just here to see. Do it now." My rage was leaking out, pushing the man before me to jump and grab his keys. He hurried out a side door, and I followed.

The bailiff kept a clean jail on the upper levels where the rat to prisoner ratio was a meager ten to one. The critters fled unseen into the walls as I stormed down a long corridor and through another locked door into a section of steel-lined cells. The guard pointed, handed me a key, and stepped out of the way.

I drew my fang-dagger and unlocked the door. The cell inside was bare, a single cot made of canvas with a man sitting upon it. Not a man, but a demon in man's clothing.

The *Kjaira* raised one arm, showing off his iron-linked connection to the wall. His right arm ended abruptly above the elbow.

“Careck,” I snarled. “I killed your brood-mates, and now, I will end the *Get of the Damogir* for good.”

“You can give it a try,” he replied. “But I’d watch your back.”

I spun, raising *Koki-Ten* in time to catch its twin as it plunged for my neck. I punched out with my palm, driving Raven back against the wall, knocking the air from her lungs. The fang-dagger tumbled from her hand, and for a moment, the sound of it hitting the stone floor and skittering to a stop was all that existed.

Careck hissed out a laugh, “Welcome to my world, brother.”

Coming Next:

The Devil and *Koki-Ten*